

Tan Sri Lee San Choon (President April 1974 – March 1983)



Tan Sri Lee went into politics at the young age of 24 by joining the MCA youth. Since then, he had dedicated the best part of his life serving the party and people. He became the youngest MP in the first general elections on August 19, 1959 when he won the Kluang Utara parliamentary seat on an Alliance ticket. Despite the fact that it was a Socialist Front stronghold, he won by a majority of 1,458 votes. At the age of 26, he was already the MCA Youth secretary general. Subsequently he rose to become the executive secretary of the Alliance and later MCA Youth Chairman. In 1963, he was appointed political secretary to Tun Tan Siew Sin who was then the President.

Tan Sri Lee became the Acting President at a crucial time when Barisan National was formed and the MCA became a major component of the new coalition which laid the foundation of a politically stable, peaceful and harmonious Malaysia. It was also under his presidency that the five major projects were launched. He also made clear MCA's stand towards the proposed Merdeka University and the establishment of institutions of higher learning. His stand was that since the establishment of the Merdeka University needed the consent of the Yang di Pertuan under the 1971 University and Colleges Act, it had to follow provisions of the Act which stipulates that the medium of instruction had to be Malay and could not Chinese as what the Merdeka University proposed to do. Thus, the MCA would be deceiving the public if it lent its support to such a university.

The MCA came under severe test in the 1978 general elections. The Opposition party used the 1961 Education Act, the Merdeka University, the Industrial Coordination Act and certain deviations in policy implementation to provoke anti-Government sentiment.

The MCA won only 17 of the 28 parliamentary seats and 44 of the 60 state seats. Tan Sri Lee won his parliamentary seat and became Transport Minister and during his tenure, he had successfully solved the MAS work-to-rule dispute

The MCA under Tan Sri Lee made immense contribution in helping the Chinese in the political and economic sectors. On August 1968, KSM, one of his brainchilds was established and within a short period of 14 years, its membership had exceeded 100,000 with millions of ringgits worth of assets.

In 1979, dispute over university intake became a hot issue. On June 28, Tan Sri Lee led an MCA delegation in a four-hour talk with Tun Hussein Onn. As a result of the talk, the ratio of university intake had been fixed at 55 per cent for Bumiputras, 45 per cent for non-Bumiputras.

In 1975, the five major MCA projects were launched. They were building of Wisma MCA, setting up of a building fund for Tunku Abdul Rahman College, setting up of Multi- Purpose Holdings Berhad, setting up of Malaysian Chinese Cultural Society and MCA membership drive. The launching of the five projects marked a major milestone in the history of the party. It laid the foundation for the Chinese to be self-reliant in facing the challenges of a rapidly changing society. He also launched the “Honour the Elders” campaign to imbue good values to the younger generation.

Tan Sri Lee believed in being pragmatic in dealing with the various challenges that the Chinese faced. Under his stewardship, he also announced the launching of Kojadi, State Holding Companies, MCA Cadre Training Centre, MCA Education Fund and MCA Cultural Centre which were also known as second phase of MCA five major projects.

The membership of the party had doubled from 200,000 to 400,000 under his presidency. The MCA had thus overcome the delimita of the 1960s by adopting this bold new approach in dealing with issues.

Tan Sri Lee was never a man to shirk from challenges. In the 1982 general elections held on April 22, he accepted the challenge by DAP secretary-general Lim Kit Siang to contest against him in a Chinese majority constituency. Tan Sri Lee chose the Seremban constituency, a DAP stronghold under Dr. Chen Man Hin. But Lim chickened out, leaving Dr Chen to defend his constituency. Tan Sri Lee won by a majority of 845 votes.

The 1982 general elections were a milestone in the MCA struggle. The Party won 24 out of 28 allocated parliamentary seats and 55 out of 62 state seats. The landslide victory was a political breakthrough as it endorsed the mandate given to the MCA in representing the Chinese Community.

However, on March 25, 1993, at the peak of his political career, Tan Sri Lee announced that he was stepping down. Despite repeated appeals, he resigned as MCA President, Transport Minister, MP for Seremban on May 1. The MCA, in appreciation of his tremendous contributions, named the multi-purpose hall at Wisma MCA as Dewan San Choon.

1935, March 24	Born in Pekan, Pahang.
1957	Joined MCA Youth.
1959, August 19	Won Kluang Utara parliamentary seat and became the youngest MP.
1961	Appointed Executive Secretary of the Alliance.
1962	Elected Chairman of MCA Youth.

- 1963 Appointed Political Secretary to Tun Tan Siew Sin who was then the MCA President.
- 1964 Won the Segamat Selatan Parliamentary seat and was appointed Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Labour. He was also appointed MCA publicity chief.
- 1969 Won the Segamat Selatan Parliamentary seat. In the Cabinet formed after the May 13 riots, he was appointed Deputy Minister with Special Functions.
- 1971 Appointed Labour Minister in the new Cabinet after Parliamentary democracy was restored.
- 1972 Appointed MCA Deputy President when Tan Sri Khaw Kai Boh died. He was Chairman of the National Basketball Association and a trustee of Tunku Abdul Rahman College.
- 1973 Appointed Minister with Special Functions and was subsequently changed to Minister of Technology, Research and New Village Co-ordination Minister.
- 1974, April 8 Was made Acting President after the resignation of Tun Tan Siew Sin.
- 1975 August Was elected President and was subsequently appointed Labour and Manpower Minister.
- 1976 Was appointed Works and Public Utilities Minister.
- 1979, August Was re-elected President after defeating Datuk Michael Chen.
- 1982, February 27 Received the Honorary Doctorate of Law conferred by the North Carolina Campbell University of the United States.
- 1982, April 22 Accepted the DAP challenge and won the Seremban Parliamentary seat defeating DAP Chairman Dr. Chen Man Hin.
- 1983, March 25 Announced his resignation as President of the MCA.