

A BIGGER CABINET?

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. — The Federal Cabinet, expected to be announced by next week, could be expanded from the present 24 Ministers.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in choosing his new team, is likely to face demands from all component members of the Barisan Nasional for increased representation in the Cabinet.

At the same time, he is unlikely to cut down on the representation that each party already has in the Cabinet, no matter how it fared in Sunday's general election.

There will be at least three new Ministers. Minister of Justice Datuk Dr James Ongkili and Health Minister Datuk Mak Hon Kam did not contest the election and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Khalil Yaakob contested a State seat and is expected to

be appointed Pahang Mentri Besar.

The sources said that among those likely to be appointed new Ministers are former Pahang Mentri Besar Datuk Najib Tun Razak and MCA central committee member Datuk Kok Wee Kiat.

At present, Umno has 14 Ministers, the MCA four (technically three excluding Datuk Mak), the MIC one, Parti Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu one, Berjaya one (Dr Ongkili), Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) one, Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) one and the Gerakan one.

Under the Federal Constitution, a member of the Cabinet has to be either an MP or a Senator. Although technically the Prime Minister can choose any member from either House to be in the Cabinet, the practice in Malaysia — as in other parliamentary democracies — has been to choose only members from the ruling party.

Dr Mahathir said yesterday morning that he did not want to make any announcements regarding his Cabinet choices because he did not want to restrict his freedom of action in choosing his new team.

However, the Prime Minister's hands are tied to a certain extent by the system he has inherited, one which caters to Malaysia's multiracial composition.

The Cabinet table is where most issues, especially the sensitive ones, are thrashed out. Representatives from each party are supposed to present their party's stand and their personal opinion.

Only after thorough discussions are decisions supposed to have been arrived at, and that, too, through consensus.

There have been instances in the recent past, especially during former Prime Minister Tun Hussein Onn's tenure, when decisions were put off or policies modified before being announced publicly because one party or another objected through its representative.

Dr Mahathir has said previously that it is not necessary that only the "best and the brightest" will be selected for the Cabinet but that there are other considerations such as how much support a person or party enjoys.

The Prime Minister is also likely to take into consideration whether a person can work well with him before choosing him.

Although the selection of Cabinet members is the prerogative of the Prime Minister alone, the tradition has been for him to consult leaders of the other component parties in the ruling coalition.

In Umno's case, Dr Mahathir will have a bit more freedom since he is also the party's president but in the case of the MCA or MIC, for example, he will consult the respective party presidents.

It is understood that Dr Mahathir discussed his options for the Cabinet with Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghafar Baba this morning.

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Umno to demand for more Cabinet posts

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Umno leaders are likely to put forward a case to Dr Mahathir that the party's representation be increased because of its strong showing in the election. It won all 83 parliamentary seats it fielded in the peninsula and lost only the Federal Territory of Labuan to an Independent.

Although the final decision on whether a person nominated by a party gets a portfolio will be made by the Prime Minister, the recommendations by party presidents are given the utmost consideration.

There have been cases during Dr Mahathir's first term when he was known to have disagreed with certain recommendations of fellow Barisan leaders on their nominees for the Cabinet but gave in to preserve Barisan harmony.

What is clear is that the new Cabinet will not have any representatives from Berjaya, which pulled out of the Barisan before the election, and the People's Progressive Party (PPP), which won only one State seat.

Hamim, the latest addition to the Barisan, is also unlikely to be given a representative since it won only one parliamentary seat.

However, the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) has asked for at least three of its representatives be made Federal Ministers. Its request, however, is not expected to be met in full.

Similarly, the MIC and Gerakan, which won six and five parliamentary seats respectively, are said to be seeking an extra Minister's post each.

The Sarawak National Party (SNAP) is also likely to ask for a Minister's post. Its former representative, Datuk Leo Moggie, left the party in 1983 to set up PBDS and SNAP has not had a representative in the Federal Cabinet since then.

In Sunday's election, the party won all five parliamentary seats allocated to it and is expected to point to its showing to back up its claims.

If SNAP is allocated a Cabinet post, Sarawak will have four representatives.

Asked this evening when he would announce the new Cabinet, Dr Mahathir said: "Not now."