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Unorthodox, but the signal is clear

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FRIDAY'S announcement by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim of the much awaited and widely looked-out for appointment of the new Selangor Menteri Besar created as much scope for further speculation as it did for closing the subject.

To begin with, the selection of Datuk Abu Hassan Omar, a Cabinet Minister, was unprecedented. Although Abu Hassan was privately mentioned as a possible candidate, few took it seriously.

Even the most informed observers considered the possibility too remote given the complexity of procedures Umno and the Barisan Nasional have to go through to effect such a change.

Before he can be sworn in as Menteri Besar, Abu Hassan has to win a by-election. He has already resigned as Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs and Member of Parliament for Kuala Selangor.

Anwar, in making the announcement on behalf of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is on an official visit to three African countries, said Abu Hassan would contest in the Permatang State seat. The incumbent BN State Assemblyman, Datuk Jamaluddin Adnan, will contest in Abu Hassan's former parliamentary seat.

The Abu Hassan factor also did not attract too much attention because the Umno leadership had in the past scoffed at such a complicated succession method, opting instead to concentrate on State Assemblymen, in particular those holding portfolios in the Executive Council.

But the impossible had happened, proving yet again Dr Mahathir's willingness to be unorthodox.

This has led a senior member of the Umno supreme council to see the selection as a strong signal that Dr Mahathir is less than impressed with State-level leaders, especially after openly declaring that he wants the new Menteri Besar to be someone honest and clean.

The Prime Minister's choice of a Cabinet Minister to fill the post could have been influenced by the circumstances surrounding the resignation of Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, and the complications arising from the often touchy relationship between Muhammad and the Sultan of Selangor.