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A stronger, more competent line-up reflected in the new Cabinet

THE new Cabinet must have triggered gasps for its big surprises - the first non-politician at the Ministry of Education, the broadest hint yet on the question of succession and a calculated omission of certain names to strengthen the backbenchers.

Significantly, it vindicated Malaysian voters who returned the Barisan Nasional with a resounding majority at last week's polls, because this Cabinet is decidedly a strong one and clearly work-oriented.

It is built to steer the country into the new millennium through a blend of experience, competency and youthful exuberance.

This can be seen in the inclusion of former acting Umno Youth leader Datuk Nazri Aziz to head the Entrepreneur Development Ministry where he was Mara chairman while Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, 38, who now heads Umno Youth, has been made Youth and Sports Minister.

Datuk Azmi Khalid (Rural Development) also joins the Cabinet, becoming the first full Minister from Perlis.

Nazri, Azmi, and Hishammuddin were involved in successive reshuffles of the administration in the last few years in the grooming process.

Returning to the Cabinet is Datuk Rais Yatim who will look after Parliamentary Affairs and Law. Rais, a respected politician whose last Cabinet post was Foreign Minister is also a constitutional lawyer.

In naming his line-up, Dr Mahathir does not seem to be dictated by traditional considerations like "State quotas" - hence, Kelantan and Terengganu are not yet represented, only a parliamentary secretary post for Malacca Umno but a full Minister's post for Perlis, a small State with three MPs.

It is learnt that a few Deputy Ministers from Kelantan and Terengganu might be appointed in the future.

Clearly, this Cabinet was not put together to appease the Umno factor in the States. Nor was the coming Umno elections factored in as suggested by the fact that Kelantan and Terengganu with 14 and 8 Umno divisions respectively not getting any post.

Kelantan did produce a BN MP, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah who is said to have declined a Cabinet post to concentrate on his task to rebuild Kelantan Umno.

It is also learnt that other non-politicians including religious figures would have made it to the Cabinet if there had been available slots for senatorships - the two vacant posts went to Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman and Tan Sri Musa Mohamad, the new Education Minister.

An academician heading the Education Ministry - Musa was formerly vice chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia - is for a big reason. Observers said the move was to de-politicise the important Ministry given that it is tasked with churning out future professionals, leaders and administrators.

The thinking is that the Education Minister would have to be a professional and someone with links to universities and academia. This also explains why Datuk Mahadzir Khir, formerly of Universiti Malaya, was appointed a parliamentary secretary at the Ministry.

On the economic front, the market is expected to applaud the fact that Tun Daim Zainuddin remains as Finance Minister following speculations whether he would remain in the Cabinet.

Over the weekend, the wire agencies had pounced on a harmless remark by the Umno treasurer who coyly told reporters then that he could not comment

on whether he would stay on. This was because at that point, no one had been offered anything.

Yesterday, commentators were quick to pounce on something else - the question of succession, which many believed, had been subtly addressed.

With Tengku Razaleigh not in the Cabinet and the position of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak not enhanced in the line-up, the way is clear for Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to eventually succeed Dr Mahathir.

The missing names range from Wanita stalwarts Datuk Napsiah Omar and Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail (formerly National Unity and Social Development Minister) to former Perlis Menteri Besar Tan Sri Dr Abdul Hamid Pawanteh and Backbenchers Club chairman Ruhanie Ahmad.

Their presence along with former Deputy Prime Minister Tun Ghafar Baba and Tengku Razaleigh, will surely bolster the backbenchers now that there will be 45 Opposition MPs.

The omission of MCA secretary-general Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh and Datuk Dr Sulaiman Daud came in the wake of earlier decisions by their respective parties.

The strong line-up of MPs in Parliament will help improve the standard of parliamentary debate. Former British Prime Minister Sir Edward Heath, for instance, continued to be an active Backbencher for many years, as is the case with John Major, the previous Prime Minister.

In the final analysis, the voters had backed BN for continued success, freedom and stability. Justifiably, the nerve of the administration, which is the Cabinet, must be one that is highly competent.

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