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A vacant DPM post levels playing field

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AS much as we would like to see the question relating to the appointment of the Deputy Prime Minister resolved, we must also acknowledge the Prime Minister's predicament.

There was a heightening of speculation in the final days of 1998 that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would name his deputy by the new year.

The new year is three-days-old and the Prime Minister has yet to change his mind on the appointment.

He had repeatedly said that he would keep the post vacant until the Umno general assembly and election in the middle of the year although he did acknowledge there had been pressure on him to make the appointment earlier.

The year-end rumour had it that the Prime Minister would appoint a temporary Deputy Prime Minister - someone who was not likely to tilt the balance of power in the party and Government.

For the comfort of those who feel that a Deputy Prime Minister should be appointed immediately, the Prime Minister's current stand is not altogether new.

This is not the first time he is faced with the task of appointing a deputy. It is the fourth.

The first time he appointed a Deputy Prime Minister was in 1981 when he became the Prime Minister. The second was in 1986 when Tan Sri Musa Hitam (then Datuk) resigned and again in 1993 when Tun Ghafar Baba conceded the post to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Musa, as it is recalled, resigned on March 16, 1986, on grounds of irreconcilable differences with the Prime Minister.

Musa was more than Dr Mahathir's deputy. He was almost his equal in the so-called "2M" Government and was given the powerful Home Affairs Ministry.

This is also not the first time Dr Mahathir is taking time to arrive at a decision.

He took almost two months to appoint Ghafar as Deputy Prime Minister after Musa's resignation. Ghafar was appointed on May 9.

Ghafar was then the most senior Umno vice-president but held no post in the Government having resigned from the Cabinet in 1981. He went on to win the post of deputy president in the party's 1987 election.

By insisting that the appointment of Deputy Prime Minister be postponed until after the Umno general assembly and election, the Prime Minister wants the members to make the decision and for contestants for the number two post to have an equal chance.

But the Prime Minister may still change his mind and appoint someone who is capable of helping him and yet not tilt the balance of power in the party nor influence the forthcoming party election.