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Making move to strengthen party machinery ahead of election

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TRANSITION is under way at the uppermost floors of Putra World Trade Centre, following changes to the Umno secretariat and to the Cabinet.

Umno's inner sanctum is at the 38th floor of the tower block, called Menara Datuk Onn, two levels above the office of Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister.

Elevated to the PWTC peak is Tan Sri Mohd Khalil Yaakob, 61, who also gets the Angkasapuri assignment as Information Minister. These two high-profile jobs are somewhat intertwined.

Back in Cabinet after 13 years as Pahang Menteri Besar, Khalil was sworn in as Senator on Monday and, then, away from the cameras, called on his predecessor as Umno secretary-general.

Datuk Seri Sabbaruddin Chik happens to be the No 2 in Pahang Umno headed by Khalil. "It is just one friend meeting another," Sabbaruddin said afterwards.

On the ground, the adjusted line-up had whipped up murmurs and rumours. To an extent, it has lifted spirits. Others are curious by its timing. The general election must be held by June next year and these are key positions.

Harakah, the Pas newsletter gave its own spin, saying that Sabbaruddin had been "evicted" (halau) from the PWTC. Aides of Sabbaruddin shed tears.

Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, 60, quitting as Information Minister after two stints totalling 16 years, has not said anything to the Press since the reshuffle.

Datuk Ibrahim Ali, a party supreme council member, said these changes were to strengthen the machinery ahead of the election.

"The party president (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) knows the position of the party now and is able assess the situation at both places," said Ibrahim.

Inextricably related to the question mark on why the changes, are the personalities involved.

One of them is Mohamed or Tok Mat, who, in person, is decidedly not the grim-faced politician who once reportedly told Malaysians: "24-hour television can lead to obesity." He banters easily, writes lyrics of patriotic songs, provides rare political insight and smokes.

And, Mohamed headed the Umno secretariat from 1987 to 1996. After 16 years at Angkasapuri he is synonymous with RTM, the Ministry's heart and soul.

Resuming links between the PWTC and Angkasapuri jobs have its merits. "It is more practical having the Information Minister doubling up as Umno secretary-general," said a former Cabinet Minister. Mohamed held both posts for nine years.

Which still leaves this little debate of why the changes are necessary. Again, personalities, situations, and the general election are recurring themes. While only Dr Mahathir knows the answer, there have been no dearth of guesses.

"With the election around the corner, you need someone with more panache and finesse before the TV cameras," speculated an Umno leader.

Malaysians will soon get to see Khalil, (he was sworn in as a Cabinet Minister yesterday) often on their TV screens. Impressions will swiftly be formed.

A senior Umno Youth official said with his track record - "you did not

hear one controversy in all his 13 years in Pahang" - Khalil is the man for what is perceived as a crisis situation.

Without being disrespectful, said Umno leaders contacted, there is a feeling that the secretariat needs to be led from the front.

Two Pahang-based politicians waiting to see Sabbaruddin at the Ministry (Monday was his last day, the same day Senators paid tribute to him), saw the new Umno secretary-general as a strategist and diplomat.

"There is a new political situation and Umno does not just need an administrator at the secretariat," said one of them.

"The new secretary-general will have to be at the frontline. With Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi assuming the duties of deputy president, there is only one vice-president (from the original three) left."

Will the role of Umno secretary-general now change somewhat, given the political backdrop?

Traditionally, the secretary-general (a non-paying job) is an administrator who doesn't even speak at supreme council meetings unless asked to.

"When we issue Press statements, we cannot veer from decisions made by the party ... we can't add our own views," said a former secretary-general.

What changes are in store? "The new man can be expected to consult experts," said a source.

The Umno Youth official raised the issue of procedures involved to sign up as a new member.

"There is red tape," said this young politician, "When Parti Keadilan Nasional and Pas can recruit members on the spot."

Then, there are issues like media relations, Internet and publicity - areas given much emphasis since the current political situation unfolded.

There had been, for instance, attempts to revive Merdeka, the Umno newsletter.

What many Malaysians are waiting to see, however, may only come down to this - how the new appointees come across on TV.

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