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New Ministers have their work cut out

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ALTHOUGH the Prime Minister tried to downplay the significance of Thursday's Cabinet reshuffle, which saw two long-serving Ministers excluded, the changes are bound to fuel speculations.

The fact that they were made at a time when talks of an early general election are rife gives the reshuffle added significance. More so as they affect the running of Umno's headquarters.

There will be members of the public who refuse to believe the changes were routine, and were meant to fill the vacancies caused by the resignation of three Ministers.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told a Press conference on Thursday that Information Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Rahmat and Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik opted to leave. They had submitted resignation letters two weeks ago.

The third Minister, Datuk Chong Kah Kiat, 51, resigned as Minister in the Prime Minister's Department to contest the Sabah election in March.

According to Dr Mahathir, the changes were to strengthen the Government and fill the vacancies.

He took pains to state that the outgoing Ministers had performed their duties well although they gave no reason for wanting to leave the Cabinet.

There is nothing to stop the people from drawing their own conclusions, especially when the two Umno Ministers have been very much in the news lately. They had, in fact, provoked a controversy of sorts with their statements.

Mohamed, for example, attracted considerable attention when he raised the ethnicity of Parti Keadilan Nasional's president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

Many saw the statement as out-of-step and totally unnecessary especially since Mohamed was seen to have made it purportedly in support of Umno and the Government.

Earlier, there had been criticisms that the Information Ministry, as the information organ of the Government, had failed to rise to the occasion in defending it against negative publicity following the regional economic crises and later the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The critics pointed out that even when the Ministry tried to defend the Government, for example, by setting up the Cetusan Rasa (the outpouring of feelings) Internet website, its 'chat site' was hijacked by those opposed to the Government.

Sabbaruddin made the news when he publicly admitted his Ministry was among Ministries and departments that failed to implement projects on time, but blamed the delay on the Treasury for not giving the money.

This led First Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin to advise Ministers and department heads to speak less, work more and check their facts before making allegations.

While Sabbaruddin is widely credited with turning tourism into a money-spinner for the country, especially since the launch of the first Visit Malaysia Year in 1990, there have been some misgivings about the performance of the sector in recent years.

Tourist arrivals have been falling since 1996 while receipts fell from a peak of RM10.4 billion the same year to RM8.5 billion last year.

WHILE crediting the outgoing Ministers with performing their duties well, the Prime Minister seems to place even greater hope in the newcomers by stating that the reshuffle is intended to strengthen the Government.

For the Government to be stronger, the newly-appointed Ministers - Tan Sri Mohd Khalil Yaakob, 61, (Information), Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, 60, (Culture, Arts and Tourism) and Datuk Pandikar Amin Mulia, 46, (Prime Minister's Department) - have to contribute more.

Even without Dr Mahathir saying so, the people would expect more from the new Cabinet members. Such is human nature.

The Prime Minister's decision to bring Khalil back to the centre after 13 years as Pahang Menteri Besar is a departure from the norm.

It is not often that a Menteri Besar or Chief Minister is brought into the Cabinet in the middle of his term as this entails making him a Senator and appointing someone else to take over from him in the State.

The shift may also create a void in the State Legislative Assembly. Such is the case with Khalil. Before he can be sworn in as a Minister, he has to be appointed to the Dewan Negara.

Although he can remain a State Assemblyman, it is inappropriate for him as a Federal Minister to attend State Assembly sessions. The likelihood is he will vacate his State seat without a by-election since the remaining term of the Assembly is less than two years.

Thus, his appointment as a Minister and Umno secretary-general has an element of urgency, and suggests strong confidence in him on the part of the Prime Minister.

Other than improving the performance of departments and agencies in the Information Ministry, he has also to make the best of his position as Umno secretary-general to enhance the management of the party's headquarters.

It is not unknown that there have been misgivings about the effectiveness of the headquarters in managing the myriad of problems the party is facing, especially anti-Government propoganda and anti-party activities by some members.

Abdul Kadir's challenge is to revitalise tourism, which includes turning around the negative international views of the country following the spate of illegal demonstrations since last September, and the outbreak of viral diseases in the past few months.

The appointment also gives Abdul Kadir a chance to work closely with Malaysia Airlines, whose standard of service he described in September 1997 as having dropped. This led to the national carrier suing him for libel the following month. The suit was eventually withdrawn.

More than a reward for long service and loyalty, the appointment is a privilege that no Minister should take lightly.

In light of recent events, it is useful to restate that it is the constitutional right of the Prime Minister to appoint Ministers to the Cabinet.

For the Ministers, it is only a privilege to be appointed to the Cabinet. It is not a right as some people have come to think.

WHILE nature took millions of years to shape the mountains, valleys and rivers, human beings are taking only months to disfigure them in the name of progress and development.

Trees have been felled, rocks blasted, valleys filled and the passage of water blocked. The equilibrium that took millions of years to achieve has been destroyed in weeks.

Yet, when rocks and mud come crashing down the hills and mountains with devastating effect, we ask why.

We make promises and call for change. We enact laws and enlist people to enforce them. We make a fuss in the media.

But hills continue to be levelled as State Governments and local authorities ignore the Federal environmental laws because they are in control of land.

So when a series of landslides occurred in the hilly areas of Hulu Kelang last Saturday, forcing the evacuation of 1,000 apartment dwellers at Bukit Antarabangsa, the same promises were repeated.

The affected housing projects could have been approved in the 1980s and completed several years ago, but the fact remains that since 1993 the area has been considered geologically unstable.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding revealed on Monday that the danger of landslides in hilly areas such as Bukit Antarabangsa had been noted by the Government following the 1993 collapse of Highland Towers.

Immediately after the Highland Towers incident, the Federal Government proposed mandatory checks and detailed environmental impact assessment studies for hillside projects with a gradient exceeding 30 degrees.

However, the Ministry could not proceed with the plan as the Attorney-General's Chambers felt it would lead to problems because land matters fell under the jurisdiction of the State Governments.

The record of most State Governments in the implementation of environmental and conservation laws is disappointing, to say the least. They guard their constitutional control of land and natural resources jealously but in many instances use their power injudiciously.

Perhaps the answer to the lackadaisical attitude of State Governments to this matter lies in the demand by the affected residents of Bukit Antarabangsa that the Federal Government be empowered to veto State Government decisions on land matters.

If this is not possible, the people who care for the environment and safety should use their votes in the coming general election to send the message to State Governments that neglect the environment.

It is not enough to 'fatten' the statute book with great-sounding laws if they are not implemented.

AS one gets older, it is wise to pay more attention to the doctor's advice. So, taking heed of the doctor's advice, I have lately been taking time off more often to see what lies beyond the newsroom and the printing hall.

It does wonders. I have since gone to Selama in Perak to see some villagers rear fish and buffaloes and to Janda Baik in Pahang to fish in a friend's pond.

One Selama villager, Abdul Nasir Yunus, 69, proudly showed me his herd of 50 buffaloes and fish ponds.

With the villagers not planting padi anymore, he could allow his herd to roam free on the river banks and surrounding oil palm smallholdings.

Several other villagers had also joined him in starting fish farming to supplement their income from palm oil.

But the once crystal-clear Sungai Selama, which I first saw in the 50s, is so murky that it is fit only for Abdul Nasir's buffaloes.

Like many other rivers in the country, it has fallen victim to development, particularly land-clearing and intensive farming.

I had also attended the Deep Purple concert at the Shah Alam Stadium, and for several minutes, joined the younger people, to dance to the songs which were popular in the 60s and 70s.

While my eardrums were being blasted by the extra-loud music, I wondered if all this would be possible had we allowed dogmatic or manipulative people to lead us.

Remember when university students were instigated to protest against

concerts by well-known local entertainers such as Sheila Majid, M. Nasir
and the late Sudirman Arshad in the universities?
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