

PM's choice surprises many

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Mahathir's mix of new, old blood in supreme council makes fine balance

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun-Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has again caught everyone by surprise with his appointment of young and inexperienced faces Umno-wise to the Umno Supreme Council.

While he brought in new faces like activist and lawyer Azalina Othman and youth exco member Azimi Daim to the supreme council, he has also eased out several veterans who fought and lost in the May Umno elections like Selangor and Negri Sembilan Mentris Besar Datuk Abu Hassan Omar and Tan Sri Mohamed Isa Abdul Samad respectively.

He has also appointed Gua Musang MP Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah to the supreme council effectively indicating the Kelantan prince's rehabilitation from his days as head of Parti Semangat 46.

Mahathir's juggling of Umno veterans for the post of state liaison chiefs and their deputy's is also an interesting mix of veterans and highly ambitious aspirants.

"Together, all the various appointments make up a fine balance between Umno stalwarts, outspoken critics, and fresh blood," said a Umno observer. "It shows Umno's readiness to accept realities and adjust itself to changing times."

Umno had lost ground in its battle with PAS and Keadilan for the "hearts and minds" of Malays, especially the younger generation.

There was also a credibility gap between the older Umno leaders and the younger generation which Umno is trying hard to close with the appointments of youth wing leaders to key positions.

The appointment of 39-year-old

activist and former NTV7 commentator Azalina and Umno youth information chief Azimi, it is hoped, will bridge the gap and help Umno regain what it has lost.

While Mahathir wants new blood and have made the right moves, it can be a difficult task for the likes of Azalina and Azimi to move in a room full of Umno veterans who are used to dealing with problems in the "old way".

People like them have little chance of fighting and winning in a Umno elections and their entry by way of appointment by Mahathir balances the composition of the Umno Supreme Council and helps to revitalise discussion in the supreme council.

One noticeable element missing is the *Tokoh Islam*. Many observers had expected Mahathir to appoint several individuals strong in Islamic knowledge to counter inroads made by PAS.

Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad and Bank Rakyat chairman Dr Norraesah Ahmad, who is also on the Wanita exco, bring many years of experience from different backgrounds to the supreme council.

The appointments of state Umno chiefs and their deputies also saw a break in tradition.

Mentris Besar had long called the shots in Umno but now have to give way to other aspirants who have been waiting in the wings for far too long after winning in Umno elections.

Among the current non-Mentris Besar who have been made Umno state liaison chiefs are Tan Sri Mohd Khalil Yaakob (Pahang), for-

mer minister and incumbent Umno information chief Datuk Mustapa Mohamed (Kelantan), party executive secretary Datuk Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor (Federal Territory) and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Penang and Terengganu).

Another unusual development which might have far-reaching implications is that several incumbent state Umno chiefs who are also mentris besar have "former mentris besar as their deputy liai-

son chiefs.

These include Selaneor's Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar with Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib as his deputy, Perak's Datuk Seri Mohd Tajol Rosli Ghazali with Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Taib as his deputy and Malacca's Datuk Wira Mohd Ali Rustam with Datuk Seri Abu Zahar Isnin as the deputy.

"This development will likely spice up party meetings at both the state and at the party headquarters," said party insiders, adding

that while at one end the appointments brings much needed new blood and experience, at the other, it might have set the stage for some factional infighting in the months ahead.

While the appointments of young and new faces are welcome, the problems they have to tackle, like winning Malays from PAS, can be a uphill task.

For a start, the choices have been made and it is left to Umno as a whole to make it work.