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Appointment of new Selangor MB a matter of great urgency

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IS it true that nothing moved in Selangor in the last few days? With the State hosting this year's Merdeka Day celebrations, and Shah Alam about to be inaugurated as a city on Sept 10, the State must have a chief executive officer soon. Very soon in fact.

The word among businessmen and civil servants in Selangor is that everyone is waiting for the new Menteri Besar. The Menteri Besar holds the key to many operations.

As for the daily State administration, the State Secretary is now the temporary point of reference. But even this is confined to routine matters only.

The key word here is "temporary". For a State like Selangor (or for that matter all States) which enjoys a growth rate of 13.8 per cent, "temporary" decision makers are not much of a big help.

The "temporary" decision makers too realise that they are just filling in the gap, and therefore their authorities are limited.

They are not about to make decisions which require political considerations, and thus overstep their boundaries.

Apart from the routine file-pushing and making decisions based on established standard operating procedures, the temporary bosses will put on hold decisions considered as major.

Approval for investments and major undertakings require the personal attention of the Menteri Besar and this will have to wait until the appointment is made official.

Former Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar, who vacated his office on Aug 11, citing "personal and health reasons" may have recommended a few names to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who will go through the list carefully before picking one.

Appointing a replacement in midstream is not always easy, unlike after a general election. Abu Hassan, the incumbent when the ruling coalition went to the polls in November last year, was picked without much of a hassle.

But at this point in time, picking his successor calls for some very careful thinking.

While the Selangor Umno Liaison Committee has submitted the names of 11 serving Assemblymen to the Prime Minister last week, he is free to choose from the list, or anyone else whom he thinks is fit to do the job.

After all, the Prime Minister has the sole prerogative of picking the candidate.

In picking the candidate, the Prime Minister will give serious consideration to several factors. Selangor has this dubious track record of having had three Menteris Besar leaving office in controversial fashion.

Other than Abu Hassan, the other two were Datuk Harun Idris in 1976 and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib in 1997.

Against this background, the candidate has to be someone who can stay clear of controversy, and has the skills to steer himself from being caught in a similar situation. Selangor does not need any more controversy and the ruling coalition must get down to some serious work immediately.

The relationship with the royal household is another factor. Picking someone with very close links with the Istana may not be desirable, but the chosen candidate will still have to develop a good rapport nonetheless.

The Prime Minister may also look to someone who can provide some continuity in State administration. Here, he may pick one of the 11 names submitted earlier. Having served the State under Abu Hassan, any one of the 11 has the experience and exposure to do the job, but Dr Mahathir may have other considerations.

He needs someone whom the other Assemblymen, particularly from Umno, can accept. They may have publicly declared that they will support anyone chosen by the Prime Minister, but this may be more of a political mindgame than anything else.

Declaring their support openly, and then stabbing someone in the back, is not unknown among some Umno politicians aspiring for high office. Attend the party annual assembly and one can see living proof of this, year in, year out.

Hence, Dr Mahathir will have to pick a candidate who can command respect from his peers and is able to make them function effectively. If the chosen one cannot get this, then he runs the risk of being undermined by his junior colleagues.

But there is the next general election to consider, too. Would it not be better to pick someone young enough, energetic too, who can lead the State to the hustings then? After all, it is estimated that some three million voters will be casting their votes for the first time in 2004, and many of them are young.

Whatever the case, aspirants should be advised not to lobby for the post. If there's a sure way not to land the job, try lobbying.

Abu Hassan, word has it, was not mesra rakyat (friendly). Hence, when he was caught in a tight spot, he could not find enough "friends" for support and to stand by him. The new Menteri Besar, whoever he may be, must make this his lesson number one.

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