

Speculation rife on who Mahathir will pick to replace Daim

SUN - 6 JUN 2001

By Zainal Epi

The guessing game on who is to replace Tun Daim Zainuddin as finance minister and minister with special functions has begun, with rumours and speculation making it more difficult to distinguish between half truths and untruths.

After two months of speculation, Daim tendered his resignation and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad accepted it last Saturday.

With Mahathir keeping his choice close to his chest, Umno leaders in particular and the public at large, are playing the name game.

Party members and observers who claim to be close to Mahathir mentioned the names of Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs

Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yasin, Johor Mentri Besar Abdul Ghani Othman and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah whose name always crops up when the country faces financial problems.

On the other hand, those in business circles who also claim to be close to the prime minister threw in the names of financial adviser to the prime minister Datuk Seri Ali Abul Hassan, Bank Negara governor Datuk Dr Zeti Ahtar Aziz and even Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, Umno information chief and also adviser to the Finance Ministry.

If the choice is Mustapa, then there has to be a parliamentary by-election because he has already served the maximum two terms as senator.

However, party veterans and political observers doubt if Mahathir will fill the vacancies until the end of the year, given the present situation in which Daim has already charted the direction

for the country's economy.

They feel Mahathir may just hold the finance minister's post until the end of the year and let his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, pick the man of his choice.

Mahathir told reporters he is now the acting finance minister and acting special functions minister.

A veteran Umno leader said: "Abdullah will lead the nation soon, next year or the year after. He will have to head the cabinet and the party. Thus, it is appropriate for Mahathir to let Abdullah pick the finance minister."

According to academics, Mahathir may want to depoliticise the Finance Ministry given the fact that the person heading it can give a lot of patronage which may contribute to abuse of power and money politics.

They feel that with Mahathir pushing to eliminate money politics in the party, the likely candidate will be a person like Daim - stingy and

not using position and patronage for political gain.

Rumours and speculation aside, party veterans say Mahathir's first criterion for the successor is loyalty to the prime minister and party president.

"After all, Mahathir may not stay as prime minister that long. He has to give it up one day and he does not want his successor to have problems with any member of the cabinet.

"Just like what he is doing right now, trying to eliminate every problem in the party before he hands it over to his successor," said a party veteran.

Depoliticising the ministry is expected to be Mahathir's main agenda given the fact that former finance ministers have been known to wield some patronage during party elections.

As in the case of the Education Ministry where Mahathir picked Tan Sri Musa Mohamed, an academic, observers feel the prime minis-

ter may do the same for the Finance Ministry.

In such a case, Ali Abul may be given the post as he is not a politician. Zeti, although capable and still young, may be second choice as "Mahathir needs to be sensitive to the party grassroots' wish in not favouring women too much", they added.

Another criterion is honesty and the absence of political ambition, characteristics of Daim, who in reality is a reluctant politician.

But many politicians and academics alike, feel that Tengku Razaleigh may be the right person now since he has good rapport with both Mahathir and Abdullah.

Politically, they feel that Tengku Razaleigh no longer poses a threat to Mahathir or Abdullah.

Mahathir and Tengku Razaleigh, as word has it, have met twice in recent months but till today there is no word whether the former has made any offer to the latter.

"They talked about the economy and politics, but no offers," said a close aide to Tengku Razaleigh.

There is also talk that Mahathir and Daim met the Sultan of Johor, purportedly to talk about appointing Abdul Ghani as finance minister.

Some Umno members said Ghani, with experience as deputy finance minister and an economics background, is also a good choice.

But the problem here is that there would have to be a by-election and this, besides costing money, may pose a risk in view of the current political scenario which does not favour the Barisan Nasional.

Talk is also rife that Rafidah may be appointed considering her vast experience and international contacts.

With the indefatigable Mahathir taking charge of the two ministries, rumour mills will go into overdrive until the two positions are filled.