

All eyes on coming cabinet reshuffle

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Changes will be a fair indicator of govt thinking, says analyst

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat: Nearly everyone is hanging on to any sliver of news on the impending cabinet reshuffle that was promised by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on his return from Myanmar last week.

However, as one senior Umno politician told *The Sun* today, while speculation is intense and wide, there is no firm lead on the proposed changes.

The only sure thing is that Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Abdul Hamid Othman is out and that, too, because he had announced his resignation.

Mahathir is famous for playing cabinet reshuffles close to his chest and also for pulling surprises like the one in August when he picked unknown Dr Mohd Khir Toyo as Selangor menteri besar.

This time, too, there will be surprises, political observers say, adding that this reshuffle might be one of the hardest for the prime minister.

Coming on the heels of all the political changes and the accompanying undercurrents, the reshuffle will be a fair indicator of Mahathir's thinking on some of the pressing issues.

In any reshuffle, the core

and senior performing ministers will be retained and most often they will be leaders of the component parties of the Barisan Nasional.

The changes affecting Umno will be the key indicators of the government's thinking.

"If Mahathir chooses new faces with liberal views or retains acceptable veterans in key ministries that cover important areas such as the administration of Islam, peace and public order and trade and finance, it will indicate the government has taken a conciliatory approach to pressing political problems," said a political analyst.

"The make-up of the cabinet will be a fair indicator of government thinking," said the analyst, adding that the make-up will also decide political and economic policies in crucial years ahead.

As always, speculation in any reshuffle centres on key individuals such as Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin.

Daim, when approached today for his views on the reshuffle, only said: "I always wanted to step down ... when the time comes."

Asked whether Mahathir had discussed the reshuffle with him, Daim said: "He is busy ... I have been busy. The reshuffle is PM's decision ... his prerogative."

Some speculate that Daim

will be finally granted his wish while others say he will stay on, if not in finance, as special functions minister.

Whether Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi keeps his home portfolio will also indicate the government's view of the political demands for changes.

"A new and conservative minister taking over home will somewhat indicate a hardening of attitudes towards political opponents and their demands," said another political analyst.

"We think Abdullah will remain as home minister," the analyst said, adding that there is speculation that incumbent Deputy Education Minister Datuk Aziz Shamsuddin might be made deputy home minister.

It is also speculated that the government will create two new ministries.

One is the Federal Territory Ministry now that Putrajaya has been added to this category and needs to be effectively administered with other such territories.

The other ministry will likely oversee legal and judicial matters which are now very important.

On the one hand, it is felt that Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Rais Yatim, who oversees legal matters, might be moved to the Foreign Ministry with current Foreign

Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar taking over as minister covering legal and judicial matters as he had done before.

Or perhaps Rais might head the Legal Ministry.

Umno Seputeh division chief Sen Datuk Tengku Adnan Mansor is tipped to enter the cabinet through the Federal Territory Ministry.

Some changes are also expected in the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Sharizat Abdul Jalil is speculated to take over from incumbent Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Suleiman who had lost the Wanita chief post to Datin Rafidah Aziz in the Umno polls last November.

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib is also tipped to be included in the new cabinet.

Two names are being mentioned for the post vacated by Abdul Hamid and one of them is Johor mufti Datuk Mohd Noh Gadot.

While some ministers need to be dropped, others will be rotated to make way for these changes.

However, all these changes remain as speculations until they are confirmed or proven false when the new cabinet is announced, thought to be likely to take place before Mahathir leaves for Japan on Thursday.