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Many elements in picking Ministers

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AT one of Ramadan's breaking of fast gatherings last month, the Prime Minister jokingly asked the editor of a major Malay newspaper whom he thought should be removed from the Cabinet.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said since the newspaper had speculated that he would reshuffle the Cabinet, he felt compelled to ask the question so as not to disappoint its editor.

The embarrassed editor did not say who the Prime Minister should drop, but insisted some changes were needed. He went on to repeat the statement in his Sunday column two days later.

The editor must be savouring the moment now that the Prime Minister has officially confirmed he would be reshuffling the Cabinet.

Speaking to the Press on his return from a five-day visit to Myanmar on Tuesday, Dr Mahathir said a Cabinet reshuffle was imminent but he needed time to deliberate on the matter.

He explained he had to think carefully before making changes, adding that this was not something that should be carried out hastily.

Although the Prime Minister said a deliberation was necessary, the Press did not say with whom he would be deliberating.

Strictly speaking, the Prime Minister does not have to deliberate the matter with anybody. The appointment to the Cabinet is his prerogative. So is the removal of any member.

Despite allegations that he did not listen to counsel, the truth is quite the opposite. He is an extremely good listener and on a number of instances he listened a bit too much to others than his own heart.

This was clearly the case in the good old days of the 2M in the early eighties. Remember the time when Mahathir equals to Musa and Musa equals to Mahathir? The 2M could be the creation of the media but a lot of people believed it.

Then Tan Sri Musa Hitam was Dr Mahathir's powerful deputy. To Musa's credit, many of his proteges and political allies were made Ministers, Menteri Besar, Deputy Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries.

His Cabinet was Musa's Cabinet until he started to bring in fresh faces, including Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, and later Tun Daim Zainuddin, into his inner circle.

This was repeated in the mid-nineties when Anwar was his deputy. Being Finance Minister, Anwar was even more influential than Musa as Deputy Prime Minister. Members of his so-called "Team Wawasan" were appointed to senior posts in the States and at the centre.

One thing that Musa and Anwar had in common was that they had the Prime Minister's ears.

A FEW years after he nearly lost to the Tengku Razaleigh-Musa challenge in 1987 Umno election, I asked Dr Mahathir privately why he brought back a certain senior Umno politician to the Cabinet despite the fact that the man opposed him in the contest.

He said he had to bring him back because Umno wanted him. The man had earlier reclaimed his seat in the Umno supreme council after being in the political wilderness for some years.

The person in question is current Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. It was a blend of fate and political wisdom that Abdullah is today Dr Mahathir's deputy. He is not only a royal party man but also a good person. He is perhaps the true ulama.

But this does not mean that the Prime Minister's hands are tied. The delegates' choice does not necessarily translate into a Cabinet job or a Menteri Besar's post.

Surely delegates to the party's general assembly who voted in a maverick like Johor's Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad neither expect nor want him to be made a Minister.

The same principle applies to a number of other leaders elected to the supreme council. They were elected not for the purpose of enhancing their chances of being made Ministers or Menteris Besar. They were elected to serve the party and to provide the check and balance.

There were talks during last year's supreme council election of the need for the party to control the Government instead of the Government controlling the party.

Such an ideal could only materialise if a sufficient number of supreme council members remain outside the Government.

As the case was with the appointment of the new Selangor Menteri Besar, Datuk Dr Mohd Khir Toyo, some months ago, the Prime Minister could coop younger leaders into the Cabinet. Or he could even bring in outsiders.

It will be a tremendous boost to Umno's image and to the morale of its young members and supporters if posts of Deputy Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries are filled with young leaders of both sexes.

The Prime Minister should be allowed to exercise his prerogative freely and to appoint people who are qualified, credible and capable. Umno and its Barisan Nasional partners have to prove to the people that the coalition is capable of rejuvenating itself.

This is not about the future of a handful of individuals. And it is not about the bad-mouthing of Umno leadership by a handful of mavericks and louts. It is about the credibility and effectiveness of the Government. It is about the future.

MUCH have been said in the newspapers and on television about the damage to the environment and the hardship to the people caused by the construction of toll highways and other infrastructure projects.

Tonnes of soil and construction debris are washed into the waterways each time it rains heavily - which is a daily occurrence in the Klang Valley where much of these activities are taking place - causing siltation and floods.

Thousands of residents, mostly the poor living on riverbanks and in low-lying areas, are driven out of their homes almost every other day by flash floods and mud flows.

For the luckless motorists and commuters, not a day (or night) passes without their passage being arbitrary closed by the clueless Bangladeshi workers, who are today the lords and masters of the construction sites.

It seems that the welfare of motorists, commuters and the public in general does not feature in the minds of the people responsible for developing these projects - from the concession holders to the contractors and the supervising agencies.

Their uncaring and irresponsible attitude is a classic example of the lack of transparency and accountability which is bringing the Government bad name.

It is bad enough that the Government is hated for approving toll highways. The irresponsible attitude of concession holders and their contractors is not making things easier for the Government.

Actually, the people do not mind paying tolls and other charges if the concession holders are responsible and the services provided are satisfactory. By right, they should be questioning the overlapping charges that they have to pay like duties on the purchase of motor vehicles, road tax and highway tolls.

Take, for example, the North-South Expressway. After the initial protest in the early years of its operation, the users are generally pleased with its standard and the supporting services it provides like emergency assistance, lay-byes, food stalls and clean toilets.

Still there are glitches. During the recent Hari Raya rush, the highway operator, Projek Lebuhraya Utara-Selatan (PLUS), did an injustice to its Smart Tag holders, who pre-paid to use the highway by opening the Smart Tag lanes to everyone else.

This scribe was among the victims. To the clueless toll operators and jaga, it was a smart move but for Smart Tag holders it constituted a breach of contract by PLUS. I wonder if the top brass of PLUS used the highway during such a rush or they took advantage of the subsidised domestic travel with MAS.

Incidentally, on the day that this scribe was short-changed by PLUS, the other user who was also caught at the Ipoh and Penang toll plazas was the outgoing executive chairman of MAS, Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli. He was driving back to Kedah for the Hari Raya. By then he was no longer the owner of MAS.

BUT the public are also to be blamed. They do not complain enough. If they do, it is more likely through the media. But the media alone cannot change this bad habit.

The concession holders and their contractors must be more responsible and responsive to the welfare of the people.

Here we are not talking about two-ringgit companies belonging to some cowherds or roadside traders. We are not talking about giant companies belonging to some of the most well-known businessmen - the Datuk and Tan Sri - and corporations in the country.

There are many well-known companies and corporations involved in major construction projects in and around Kuala Lumpur.

Sadly, most of them do not even bother to put up signboards to apologise to the public for the inconvenience caused by their projects. One needs only to travel along the Federal Highway next to the Mid Valley Mega Mall to realise this.

Sadly too, our consumers' associations seem to be caught in the fish price syndrome when the future burden on consumers will come from services like transportation, electricity, water, telephone, waste disposal, highway toll and parking charges.

So much for our caring society, corporate governance, transparency and accountability. We may have first world projects and companies, but their services are very much the Third World. This is because our mentality is still very much a Third World mentality. The tidak apa mentality.

DAMN the cellular phone users who take their sets to mosques and other prayer places.

Even at Prime Minister's tarawih prayer during last month's Ramadan, one such phone rang incessantly.

The owner should have the sense to discontinue his sunat prayer and switched off the phone instead of allowing it to ring repeatedly and disturb the congregation.

A similar event at Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's house and later at Tun Daim's surau. It happened at the National Mosque almost every week during Friday prayers.

I am sure the followers of other faiths had the same unpleasant experience with these thoughtless cellphone users.

I am not suggesting that the damnation of hell should be the punishment for them. Purgatory is a bit too much. But they must be made to suffer the embarrassment.

Mosques, surau and other prayer houses should display "switch off

handphone" signs prominently.

The fact that they disturb you during players and at public functions does not mean that our cellular telephone services are efficient. They may be expanding but their quality is deteriorating.

What is the regulator doing about it?

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