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Quiet trouble-shooter bows out, once again

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THOSE who have met Tun Daim Zainuddin would generally agree that his name is wrongly spelt. It should not be "Daim" but "Diam" which means "quiet" in Malay.

The man singled out as one of the main architects of the nation's economic recovery in 1984 and 1999 is indeed reticent.

Unlike most other politicians who believe that verbal diarrhoea is the way to get publicity, Daim shuns the media.

Despite his quiet ways he has never been able to avoid the limelight, becoming a target of speculation, accused of intrigues and of being a master of political and economic manoeuvring.

Barely five feet four, Daim stands tall above the rest and has, by chance or design, created the perception that he is one of the most powerful politicians in the country, second only to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Hence it is not surprising that every time there is news he is leaving the Cabinet, reports and speculation abound.

Yet, the talk of Daim resigning his Cabinet or any other government post is not something new. Sometimes, the stories started making the rounds when he had barely begun to warm his seat.

And Daim does not help matters as he has always seemed to be a reluctant politician or participant in the nation's policy-making circles.

His first stint as Finance Minister from 1984 through 1991 was during an economic crisis. He agreed to take on the responsibilities because he was requested to do so by Dr Mahathir.

After turning things around, Daim chose to resign. In 1993, he accepted an appointment as the nation's Economic Adviser which was accorded ministerial status. But barely into his second year in that post, Daim expressed his intention of resigning on the ground that he had done what needed to be done.

After newspapers reported on it, Dr Mahathir said he was not in favour of it and Daim continued to serve in that capacity.

The incident further entrenched the perception that of the many politicians in Umno, Daim is Dr Mahathir's most trusted aide.

In fact, the general populace tend to see Dr Mahathir and Daim as being "almost inseparable" in the management of the country and they complement each other in the management of the nation.

When the country was hit by the crisis of 1997 caused by rogue currency speculators, Dr Mahathir again roped in Daim to assist in handling the situation.

The National Economic Action Council (NEAC) was set up in December that year and Daim was made the executive director.

More clout was extended to Daim by June 1998 and he was made the Special Functions Minister, a new portfolio.

When then Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was sacked in September 1998, Dr Mahathir assumed the post but many in the political circles were already speculating that it was a matter of time before Daim would take over.

True enough, in January 1999, Daim returned to the Finance Ministry after an eight-year absence.

It was natural for analysts and political observers to speculate that Daim would always be entrusted with the responsibility for the Finance

Ministry in times of crises. Almost equally natural was speculation about his resignation when things began to get better.

In fact, since last year, speculation about Daim giving up the Finance Minister's post had cropped up every now and then.

The reasons for that have ranged from wanting to get out of the hectic schedule, return to his business interests, to a rift with Dr Mahathir.

Again, every time such speculation emerged, it was easy for many to believe them. All of this had to do with Daim's reluctance from the start to participate in the nation's policy-making bodies.

But the speculation gained momentum two months ago when Daim said he was going on leave.

To observers, it was the prelude to his resignation but most in the party's inner circle, including Dr Mahathir and Daim himself, continued to dismiss the speculation as mere rumours.

In fact, on Friday, Dr Mahathir still refused to confirm the speculation.

But the confirmation finally came yesterday, and with that ended Daim's illustrious, at times controversial, hold on the nation's purse.

It was learnt that his resignation is not confined to his responsibilities as Finance Minister but extends to Special Functions, as well as the executive directorship of NEAC and as the treasurer of Umno.

Is there a possibility that Daim, at 63, will make a return to the Cabinet or other important positions in the Government?

Given his past track record, no one would dare bet their last dollar that he won't return, but at this stage it looks like Daim has called it quits for good.

One thing is for sure, though Daim may be one known for his quiet ways, yet his every move always raises a din.