

19/01/2001

Women's important role

CHANGES to the Cabinet are necessary from time to time as a process of renewal and to respond to changing circumstances. Announcement of the country's first cabinet reshuffle since the 1999 general election came on Wednesday but contrary to some early speculations, there were no major changes. There are a few new faces, but no Minister or Deputy Minister lost his job.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is not in the habit of changing the Cabinet for the sake of change. As in governments everywhere, it is natural that some members perform better than others. However, the fact that the changes are minor and the Cabinet thus remains largely intact, is perhaps a statement that the Prime Minister is satisfied with his team's performance. It will do the country no good to tinker with a boat that is sailing fine, especially when it is on the high seas. The Government has done a good job in ensuring peace and stability and in meeting the many challenges facing the country. It has succeeded in overcoming the recession caused by the regional financial and economic turmoil and put the country firmly back on the path of growth. However, the future is fraught with uncertainties. It has to remain vigilant of new challenges now that the US economy is expected to slow down and brings in its wake possibly adverse implications for the Asian economies.

The appointment of People's Progressive Party's president Senator Datuk M. Kayveas as Deputy Minister of Housing and Local Government allows for a wider representation in the Government. The participation of more partners from the Barisan Nasional in the affairs of government will enhance its cohesiveness.

One significant development is the creation of a Women's Affairs Ministry, which will be headed by Datuk Shahrizat Jalil, a lawyer and presently Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department. This is clear recognition that there are issues peculiar to women and gives emphasis to the importance of the role of women in the nation's affairs. And quite rightly, too, a woman is appointed to the job. This is not to suggest that women-related problems such as single mothers and violence against women are not being tackled under the present administrative set-up. Certainly they are. But the new Ministry would bring an added urgency to women-related issues that need lasting remedies and help widen the scope of the contribution of women to nation building. There are provisions in various laws and practices in employment and the workplace that are considered by women's groups to be discriminatory. The new Ministry would be an effective vehicle for changes to be made. We do not want our mothers, wives and sisters to be unfairly treated.

Unlike in the past when they were mainly confined to the home, the liberated women of today are better educated and form a considerable working population. Women have long been doing excellent work in such professions as teaching, nursing and social welfare service, but they have recently encroached into what used to be male-dominated professions such as medicine, engineering and accountancy. There are also increasingly successful women entrepreneurs.

Women already form a substantial proportion of the electorate and their collective voice will play an increasingly important role in influencing the Government. The new Women Affairs Ministry is a testimony of this.

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