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Jamaludin the rising star

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THERE is nothing spectacular about the rise of Jamaludin Jarjis in politics. At least there wasn't until Tuesday, when the Prime Minister's office issued a statement to announce his appointment as Second Finance Minister.

Prior to this, Jamaludin, better known as JJ, was considered unlikely even to upstage his namesake on the Malay pop scene, Jay Jay of Rindu Bayangan fame.

At least his "enemies" said so when asked what they thought of Jamaludin's chances of ascending the Umno ladder. Now, it is different.

In fact, even before Jamaludin was appointed to the Cabinet, he was the focus of attention for his appointment as chairman of Tenaga Nasional Bhd two years ago.

No doubt, he got a bad Press then, when questions were raised about his ability to manage the leading utility.

The doubts were all the stronger as his predecessor Tan Sri Dr Tajuddin Ali was considered of "better pedigree".

"But you have got to give it to JJ. He managed to turn those doubts into confidence," said a former Umno Youth exco member who was together with Jamaludin in the movement in 1988.

A party insider pointed out that Jamaludin not only managed to silence his critics on his appointment to Tenaga Nasional, but played an active role despite being a mere non-executive chairman.

"Now, he is the man holding the nation's purse. Can you imagine him lying low and remaining a minor player in Umno politics?"

Jamaludin enters the arena with numerous perceptions about him.

They may be assets as much as baggage.

He is generally perceived as a backer of Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

There is a lot of truth in that. Born in Pekan, Pahang, Najib's constituency, Jamaludin started his political career there. When he became an Umno Youth exco, Najib was the movement's chief.

He was also one of the main campaigners for Najib in the contest for the party vice-presidency.

So when Jamaludin's appointment was announced, observers immediately concluded that it was a move by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to strengthen Najib's position in the hierarchy.

Then came speculation that Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdul Ahmad Badawi was not even informed of Jamaludin's appointment.

All these lend weight to numerous theories about the ever-changing political equation in Umno.

The theories become more intriguing when linked to the impending resignation of Dr Mahathir, Abdullah's succession and the yet-to-be named deputy.

However, Abdullah has dismissed speculation that he was not informed at all about Jamaludin's appointment.

He said Dr Mahathir had informed him of the decision to appoint Jamaludin and he (Abdullah) had concurred.

Highly-placed sources revealed that Dr Mahathir and Abdullah discussed the appointment of Jamaludin about a month ago, and the latter actually agreed with the choice.

While such matters are important in dismissing theories that Abdullah is

being undermined in such an important Cabinet appointment, the contentions that Jamaludin was chosen to strengthen Najib persist.

However, a party insider revealed:

"It was when (Datuk Seri) Anwar Ibrahim was sacked as the Deputy Prime Minister, and Dr Mahathir was trying to decide who among the senior party leaders would be suitable to fill the vacancy."

Abdullah and Najib were the main contenders as they were the vice-presidents then.

"Dr Mahathir finally decided Abdullah should be his deputy.

"However, before he made the announcement, he called Najib to ask his opinion.

"Najib then went back and discussed the matter with his political advisers and Jamaludin was among them.

"It was he who advised Najib to support Dr Mahathir's choice. Jamaludin's opinion on that matter is said to have irked a certain individual close to Najib."

But several mid-level Umno political players believe it is simplistic to label Jamaludin as merely Najib's man or any other leader's, for that matter.

"It is true he is close to Najib but he has also proven to be an Umno man and this is the main reason why Dr Mahathir chose him for the powerful post," said one.

The former Umno Youth exco who was together with Jamaludin said the MP for Rompin would probably, after assuming the Second Finance Minister's post, prove to be his own man.

"I have always believed that JJ is not someone to be written off.

"Among our peers, he was always the one who was clear about his political direction and very focused on where he planned to go.

"To me, he is going to be the man to watch."

Another party insider said the stage was all set for Jamaludin to be a contender for Umno's "secondtier" leadership.

"When Abdullah takes over, let's say Najib is made his deputy. Then the top leadership echelon is well-established.

"What should be the focus will be who among the Umno younger generation will be in the running to fill up the vacancies in the vice-presidency."

The insider said the few names within the hierarchy worthy of being considered would be Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein and Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Khir Toyo.

"But now, with Jamaludin, who is only 51, holding such an important post, the equation will definitely include him."

Of course, said the insider, others may come into the picture later, but the present scenario positions Jamaludin perfectly for higher honours.

His former Umno Youth exco colleague shared the sentiment, arguing that Jamaludin had been through all levels of the party hierarchy.

"It is not that he has been suddenly plucked from outside the party to take up an important position. He had to compete at numerous levels before becoming the supreme council member.

"No doubt, in the past, his ascension was aided by his close association with Najib.

"But now, with the Finance Ministry, he has his own vehicle and it is up to him how far he wants to go in the political race.

"He is quite a smooth operator."

At the same time, a party elder had a word of caution for rising star Jamaludin.

He pointed out that the Finance Ministry was no doubt a powerful tool of patronage and those holding it could change their political fortune.

"But it could also be their downfall.

"Lest Jamaludin forget, his last two predecessors left the ministry not under the best of circumstances.

"One was ungraciously removed.

"The other packed his bags amid much negative speculation."

Is the sword of Damocles hanging over Jamaludin?

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