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Major changes to Cabinet (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is holed up away from the buzz of activity and lobbying as he draws up his Cabinet line-up and restructures several ministries.

The New Straits Times understands that Abdullah could change the Cabinet he inherited from the previous administration by as much as a third, in keeping with the policy of bringing in new talent.

The line-up could be finalised as early as Saturday, and the ministers are expected to be sworn in on Tuesday, a day before the weekly Cabinet meeting.

Since Abdullah took over as Prime Minister from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Oct 31, there has been intense speculation on the shape of his Cabinet.

He tweaked the line-up earlier in the year when he named Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop as Second Finance Minister, appointed Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin as Agriculture Minister and gave the domestic trade and consumer affairs portfolio to Datuk Jamaludin Jarjis.

The plan all along was to make major changes only after receiving a mandate from the electorate. With 198 of the 219 parliamentary seats in the bag for Barisan Nasional and Terengganu back in the stable, there is wide-spread speculation that his Cabinet will resemble the first Cabinet of Dr Mahathir in 1981 - it will be full of new faces.

At a Press conference yesterday, Abdullah was asked if he would retain some of the ministers who had served for several terms.

He replied: "I will consider all aspects. But what is vital is their ability to serve as good ministers."

It is understood that age is not a criterion as the new Cabinet is likely to include a few experienced hands, including those who have experience of the national stage.

The strong BN showing in Terengganu and Kelantan also puts Datuk Mustapa Mohamed and Datuk Awang Adek Hussin in the frame and raises the expectation of others.

Not surprising, then, that aides to Abdullah and his close friends have been inundated with SMS and calls to their mobile phones from politicians who want to be considered for Cabinet positions.

The lobbyists could not reach the Prime Minister with their pleas or surprise him by showing up at his home or office in Putrajaya.

He was taking a break after eight days of campaigning.

But Abdullah is likely to have more positions to fill. Several ministries are going to be split up, creating new positions in the process.

On top of that, Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob and Energy, Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Amar Leo Moggie did not contest the election.

The only person untroubled by all the speculation is Nor Mohamed. He will assist Abdullah, who is expected to retain the finance portfolio.