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A minor reshuffle of major import

IT was all in the timing. Although the capital's rumour mills had been at a loss to explain the delay in the appointment of the Deputy Prime Minister, the moment finally arrived with the sureness of critical building blocks being lowered neatly into place. Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has exercised his sole and unpressured prerogative to name his second-in-command for the national project of his prime ministership, whose outlines had been chiselled since he took office last Oct 31.

The choice of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak as DPM was the leading component of a mini Cabinet reshuffle that cements the Abdullah administration's reform-minded platform. Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop - the former central banker enlisted by Tun Mahathir Mohamad to save the country from the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis - has been appointed Second Finance Minister. After having engineered the capital, corporate and debt restructuring that had kept the economy afloat when it very nearly went under, he will now directly assist Abdullah, who is also Finance Minister, to re-orient policy and balance the Budget by 2006 after years of deficit spending.

Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, the ranking Umno vice-president after Najib, has been moved to a key plank of the Government's agenda: the revival of the rural sector. He has been appointed Minister of Agriculture to boost incomes and production among the nation's farmers and fishermen, long left behind by rapid industrialisation. The task of reconverting the rural populace to the ideology of progress, and away from the false charms of the Opposition, befits his seniority in both government and party. The religious and political credentials of the former Johor Menteri Besar and Youth and Sports Minister will be deployed to the full against Pas in this frontline vote bloc.

Muhyiddin's predecessor, Datuk Seri Effendi Norwawi, has been switched to Minister for Special Functions, where he will take responsibility for improving public delivery systems, another of Abdullah's strategic goals. As a politician and businessman, he is well placed to recognise that Malaysia Inc must not diminish the Government's duty to serve the people efficiently and transparently. Equally, Datuk Jamaluddin Jarjis's private sector background should lend the skills of a technocrat to his new portfolio of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs, to which he has been promoted and where he will have the chance to prove himself after a stint as the junior minister at the Treasury.

The upshot of Abdullah's programme is deceptively simple: win the people's support by making the Government work better and harder. His choice of Najib, one of the nation's most experienced politicians, reflects his desire to re-energise and re-mobilise Umno's and the Government's considerable resources beyond the general election, which may be held as early as March. The eldest son of second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein carries the brand-name of stability and continuity in Umno and possesses the ability to help Abdullah shape the Government up to present-day realities.

The Prime Minister has much to do to meet the expectations heaped upon him by the electorate. He has gone some way to satisfying them by making subtle but profound changes in a Federal Cabinet that has long proved its competence and coherence in running the country. Responses to the

reshuffle have been positive, and not merely because of the removal of uncertainties in the Government's make-up. Had the decisions been made sooner, the Abdullah administration would not have acquired the distinct personality it now has.