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Agriculture to figure prominently

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IT was quite clear from the beginning that agriculture would figure prominently in Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's administration. On Nov 1, just a day after he assumed the post of Prime Minister, Abdullah's first official task was to hand over relief aid to farmers affected by floods in Seberang Prai.

The next day he did the same to farmers in Baling.

And when tabling a motion of thanks to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Dewan Rakyat on Nov 3, Abdullah emphasised the need to ensure that rural development continued to be given priority and that new sources of wealth be identified for those in the rural sector. Both these initiatives mean one thing - an accent on agriculture and food production.

Thus, the appointment of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin as the new Minister for Agriculture falls cleanly in line with Abdullah's grand plans for the sector. Hence, any notion that the change of portfolio is a demotion of sorts for the former Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister should be dismissed.

For one, it is most sensible to hand over a task placed with such importance to a person like Muhyiddin, who has a rich experience at the grassroots being an Umno vice-president, seasoned elected representative and former Menteri Besar.

Muhyiddin's religious credentials and background as a fine administrator also make him the right man for the job. It is quite well known among political circles that he is wara' (an Arabic term meaning a pious person) and can recite Quranic verses with ease. He once also served as an Assistant District Officer in Muar, meaning he is used to mingling with rural folk and listening to their problems.

Abdullah's decision to place Muhyiddin in the agriculture portfolio is also seen as a strategy to check Pas influence among the rural folk, especially in the east coast and northern States. At 56, Muhyiddin who holds a BA honours degree in Economics and Malay Studies from the Universiti of Malaya and with all his experience, probably wields the right qualification and persona to do just that.

In fact, observers are already pointing out to the fact that the party stalwart will be the dependable one Abdullah is counting on to lead the charge against Pas and win the hearts and minds of voters in the rural Malay heartland in the coming general election.

Muhyiddin has also had an impeccable record in government, having brought great strides to Johor's industrialisation programme when he was Menteri Besar from 1986 to 1995. He also shone as Youth and Sports Minister and saw to it that Kuala Lumpur hosted one of the best Commonwealth Games ever in 1998.

As Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs, his last portfolio, Muhyiddin was also frequently in the limelight, having to tackle issues on high prices and consumerism - something that is dear to almost every Malaysian.

Pictures and stories of him making spot checks at markets and shops as a festive occasion approached has made him one of the most recognisable faces among Cabinet ministers.

Muhyiddin was also instrumental in introducing ceiling prices for many essential goods and a key figure in the fight against CD and VCD piracy.

He is married to Puan Sri Noorainee Abdul Rahman and has four children.

