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Demanding work awaits Najib when the `honeymoon' is over

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DATUK Seri Najib Razak walked in several minutes late, deliberately, for his first Cabinet meeting as Deputy Prime Minister last Wednesday. Anxious, full of trepidation, he did not know what to expect.

But when all the Cabinet members started thumping the table on seeing him - a sign of endorsement - only then did he relax and slip into the unfamiliar chair on the right of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Speaking in an interview at his home two nights after his appointment, Najib, casually dressed in a red T-shirt with visitors still streaming into his house to congratulate him, seemed confident in his new job.

But on the morning of Jan 7, he woke up to see screaming banner headlines in all newspapers speculating that he would be the next Deputy Prime Minister. Najib had been given his appointment letter at 5.45 the previous evening by Abdullah, but the official announcement was only out that afternoon at 1.30.

Najib said that when he arrived for the Cabinet meeting the next morning, "I wondered whether I should go into the meeting and sit on the Prime Minister's right because that is where the deputy sits. Or would the other Cabinet members who had not been informed yet think that I was too presumptuous? I already knew but they did not."

So, he waited in the corridor and then went into the washroom to kill time.

"I felt that I must walk in later after the PM had informed the Cabinet. So I waited in the washroom, nervously, gave a few minutes, and then walked into the Cabinet room.

"When all the ministers present started thumping on the table, I knew that Pak Lah had informed them and that I could then take my seat on his right," he laughed, recalling that moment. "That is how I was introduced as Deputy Prime Minister."

It came as a relief to Najib that the announcement was finally made; that after months of anxiety, he had been proclaimed as the successor to Abdullah.

As the most senior Umno vice-president, Najib was always considered the front runner for the job.

But after Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced his retirement in June 2002, and publicly declared that Abdullah would succeed him, it did not take long for the potent Umno rumour mill to start churning out the "what if" scenarios.

If Abdullah takes over, who would be his deputy? If it's not Najib, would it be Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin? If it was neither, would it be Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz or Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim?

Some of the speculation was really wild and, understandably, Najib was uncertain.

While many felt he was the clear front runner because of his seniority as vice-president, the theorists pointed out that it had never been an Umno tradition to appoint the most senior vice-president as Deputy Prime Minister.

Dr Mahathir was the third vice-president when he was chosen by the late Tun Hussein Onn to be his deputy. Tun Ghafar Baba was also not the top vice-president when he was chosen as Deputy Prime Minister after Tan Sri Musa Hitam's resignation in 1986.

And Abdullah himself was the second vice-president when Dr Mahathir picked him as No 2.

But right from early on, Abdullah's closest aides had indicated to Najib that he was the preferred choice. Why then was he so unsure?

"I never take things for granted. It was never really like it was fait accompli, although I feel comfortable in Pak Lah's company. I know that in our political system, it is only when the Prime Minister makes the announcement are you sure," he said.

He likened his situation to that of a postdated cheque.

"You won't know whether there is cash until the cheque gets cashed," he joked.

All he hoped for, he said, was that Abdullah would feel confident in selecting him as deputy.

When Abdullah told him of his appointment on the evening of Jan 6, only then did Najib feel that the post-dated cheque was cashable. Najib was called in to see the Prime Minister at 5.45pm and was given his appointment letter.

At the next day's Cabinet meeting, after Najib took his rightful seat, Abdullah announced the other changes in the Cabinet, and also asked everyone to give their fullest co-operation to Najib.

A senior minister said that towards the end of the meeting, an emotional Najib told Abdullah:

"I will always remind myself that I am number two to you. I hope that over time, I can convince you that you made the right choice."

Asked whether he really said that, Najib laughed again. "Yes, something like that."

He explained that he was touched by Abdullah's confidence in appointing him as deputy and what he said at the meeting was instinctive and came "from my heart".

"At the end of the meeting, I felt I had to respond. I said it from the bottom of my heart."

Najib has gone the extra mile in recent days in publicly reiterating what he said during the Cabinet meeting, pledging his loyalty to Abdullah and promising to work hard to ensure the success of the national agenda.

And the hard work will come.

Abdullah has kept a punishing pace since he took office, traversing the country and also making the traditional courtesy calls on other Asean heads of Government. Barely two days after he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister, the Umno supreme council told Najib to assume the duties of Umno deputy president and by extension, chair the weekly party management committee meetings.

He will also chair several Cabinet committees - Abdullah was chairman of more than a dozen Cabinet committees when he was deputy - in addition to working with Abdullah in strategising for the general election which must be held before year's end but speculated to be much earlier, possibly in the second quarter of the year.

In a meeting with senior editors in November, Abdullah said that his deputy would be traversing the country to help him gear up for the general election.

As Defence Minister and Umno vice-president, Najib's duties were lighter. But from now, he will be doing more and more. The queue of visitors to his home and office will get longer and longer and his aides will be swamped with phone calls and requests to meet the boss.

Soon, the congratulatory bouquets lined up all over the hallway and in sitting rooms will start to wilt and the real tough work will begin.

"I look forward to it. We want Malaysia to be on the world map. I will work hard to achieve the national agenda set by the Prime Minister," he

pledged.

At 50, Najib has the energy. And his supporters believe he also has the determination and single-mindedness to fulfil his promise.