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Hussein puts his faith in Mahathir

By K. Das

Kuala Lumpur: "I have made my choice and can only pray and hope that the choice is a correct one and that he will be accepted and supported by the country generally" — Prime Minister Hussein Onn announcing Dr. Mahathir Mohamed as Deputy Prime Minister.

There was a gasp in the audience of pressmen and the applause that began before the anticipated announcement scattered and died. Searching glances around the Prime Minister's office filled the short, surprised silence. The Prime Minister himself closed his secret file and secured the red tape around it. He looked tense. His aides, including the Information Minister, Taib Mahmud, looked as surprised as the rest of the audience.

It then dawned on all present why the Premier had indeed launched his Deputy on a hope and a prayer. The choice of Dr Mahathir as a potential successor must have been Prime Minister Hussein Onn's most difficult decision since he took office.

In choosing Mahathir — author of the *Malay Dilemma*, a book which is still banned here for its highly provocative statement of Malay grievances and arguments for special treatment for the *bumiputras* (sons of the soil) — as Deputy Premier of a multiracial country in which the Chinese make up 35% of the population and the Indians 10%, Datuk Hussein Onn ended nearly two months of speculation but set in motion another talking point for Malaysia's minorities.

The agonising issue: Will Dr. Mahathir, conventionally regarded as an inflexible Malay-firster, undergo a transformation that will win him trust and confidence, especially of the Chinese?

Some of his recent statements lead observers to believe that he has such a transformation in mind. His national language policy, too, must see some changes since it is yet another issue that preoccupies the non-Malays, who feel that speed is not of the essence in making Malay the sole official and social language.

If the naming of the controversial Education Minister was a surprise, another surprise distracted the newsmen almost at once, and the Prime Minister was asked questions — very obliquely in the name of politeness — why the most senior Vice-President of the United

Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Agriculture Minister Ghafar Baba, was dropped from the Cabinet. Only the day before, newspapers had headlined Ghafar on "tip-offs" as Datuk Hussein's choice for Deputy.

The Prime Minister answered with equal politeness and equal obliqueness, and very much to the point as the question was framed, that the Agriculture post would be filled in due course.

On analysis, the Cabinet reshuffle turned out to be a good exercise in balancing power, meeting some expectations of the various component parties in the ruling National Front, checking the powerful lobbies within UMNO, calming some fears of foreign investors and returning some confidence to the multiracial population vis-à-vis any ultra

Malay nationalism. While there have been privately-voiced reservations about the appointments of Dr Mahathir as Deputy Premier and Tunku Razaleigh Hamzah as Finance Minister, the innovation that has balanced the worry is the appointment of three full ministers without portfolio to assist the Prime Minister.

The new ministers include an Indian and a Chinese, who will assist Datuk Hussein in matters of law and economics. The two, Datuk Athi Nahappan and Tan Sri Chong Hon Nyan, having served as deputy ministers of law and finance, are seen by the ordinary Chinese and Indians as "deputy prime ministers"; and the fact that a third full minister, former deputy home minister

Dr. Mahathir, also assists the Premier in matters which seem to them not to be of great importance.

The initial gasp of surprise, it is thought, that would Dr Mahathir as a member, his powers will not be as far-reaching as those of the late Tun Dr Razak, the late Tun Abdul Razak or Datuk Hussein himself when they were deputies. By appointing three ministers to assist him, the Prime Minister has in effect taken on the responsibility for Security, Law and Finance. He has also retained Defence, and as he announced soon after the Cabinet shuffle, his priority will be security.

In effect, the Deputy Premier will have to concentrate on Education, a portfolio fraught with enough problems, as became obvious last week when students in Kuala Lumpur took over the campus of the Mara Institute of Technology.

If the circumscribing of power by creating additional ministers calmed fears over any extreme resurgent Malay nationalism, the same action also poured some balm over the anxieties of foreign investors who were said to be worried about the consequences of Tunku Razaleigh's appointment as Finance Minister. The new Minister's name has for the past year been synonymous with the very unpopular Petronas Development (Amendment) Act (the amendments empowered, in effect, Petronas to take over the shares of foreign investors in the petroleum industry without the payment of compensation).

While enjoying the assistance of a Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) Deputy Minister, Tunku Razaleigh has also to reckon with the former deputy, Chong Hon Nyau, as a watchdog minister of finance attached to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has also re-

tained Raja Tan Sri Mohar, Chairman of Malaysian Airlines System (MAS), as his special economics adviser.

The appointment of a full minister to assist in matters pertaining to law reflects Datuk Hussein's concern over corruption in high places.

Reaction to the new Cabinet has been generally uninspiring and the newspapers have as usual played up the more positive views and ignored the meaningful silences. The Malaysian Chinese Association, however, has not shown any official enthusiasm. From its central headquarters there is no doubt that the Party has accepted the Premier's decision, but Dr Mahathir must be conscious that the indifferent reaction is a measure of the MCA's disappointment. The REVIEW understands that he has in recent months actively worked to change his image among the Chinese Party as well as the predominantly Chinese Party Gerakan membership.

Support from Party Gerakan, expressed by the Penang Chief Minister, Dr Lim Chong Eu, was lukewarm and phrased in terms that must make the new Deputy Premier realise that the road ahead promises to be rough. Dr Lim said that "Datuk Hussein has made his choice and the country must support him."

Another National Front partner, Partai Islam (PI), has also failed to register any enthusiasm for the choice of the Deputy Prime Minister.

The major political parties in Sabah and Sarawak have unreservedly welcomed the new Cabinet. Although the Sarawak National Party (SNAP) has remained silent, the leaders of both Berjaya, the opposition, and Tun Mustapha's USNO (United Sabah National Organisation) in Kota Kinabalu have gone out of the way to express their enthusiasm for Datuk Onn's Cabinet, heaping praise on the new leadership with something like