

PM expected to unveil cabinet tomorrow
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Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is expected to unveil a new cabinet tomorrow, which observers said will indicate his appetite for reform after humiliating election results. MCPX

Abdullah has defied calls to quit after the March 8 polls and is promising "new faces" in a cabinet tipped to be trimmed in size after the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition lost its two-thirds majority for the first time since 1969.

"The announcement is expected to be made on Tuesday," a spokesman from the prime minister's office told AFP.

Abdullah's previous cabinet had a whopping 32 ministers, 39 deputy ministers and 20 parliamentary secretaries - 91 posts in all - with jobs handed out to many of the 14 race-based parties that make up the coalition.

The large cabinet had been criticised as unwieldy and wasteful, and there is speculation that some ministries could be merged now that there will be just 140 BN lawmakers, compared to 198 in the outgoing administration.

However, newspaper reports have said Abdullah faces a headache in reducing positions while still mollifying coalition members who are being courted by opposition figurehead Anwar Ibrahim.

Abdullah has said that the new line-up will reflect the coalition's racial power-sharing concept and include all the communities - majority Muslim Malays and minority ethnic Chinese and Indians.

Piecemeal changes

But observers have said he will have difficulty finding ethnic minority candidates to fill prominent posts, after the Chinese and Indian parties in the coalition were punished in the elections.

The only Indian cabinet minister in the outgoing administration, S Samy Vellu, lost his parliamentary seat, which he had held since 1974.

The minority parties in the coalition bore the brunt of voter anger over rising 'Islamisation' of Malaysia and criticisms the government was insensitive towards the needs of minorities.

Political analysts have said that Abdullah's Umno, which leads the coalition, is in urgent need of reform and that the cabinet line-up will indicate whether that is likely to happen.

"Abdullah needs to make really bold moves, to bring in an economic team that brings confidence to the investment community," said Bridget Welsh, a Southeast Asia expert from Johns Hopkins University who observed the elections.

"That means new faces, and the minute he removes older faces he weakens himself further with more infighting and leadership challenges," she said.

"So my feeling is that they'll put bandaids on the wounds, and this is how they'll continue to govern."

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