

**Shahrir : we need more aggressive ministers**  
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**Beh Lih Yi**

The appointment of the outspoken Shahrir Abdul Samad as the domestic trade and consumer affairs minister in the new cabinet line-up unveiled two days ago has taken many by surprise. MCPX

"But I don't feel anything," the 58-year-old Johor Baru MP, who has a long, colourful political career, told Malaysiakini in a 30-minute phone interview on the night he was appointed minister.

shahrir samad background political history 200308Shahrir has been a vocal critic on how things were handled by the same government led by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi especially on issues relating to efficiency and integrity.

Among others, Shahrir has criticised the government's handling of the RM4.6 billion Port Klang Free Zone controversy, the RM6.75 billion offshore patrol vessels deal and the controversial merger of ECM Libra Avenue.

He clearly showed his unhappiness when he quit as the Barisan Nasional's Backbenchers Club head in a huff in 2006 after his fellow BN MPs failed to join him to defend an opposition's motion "to safeguard the autonomy of Parliament and the dignity of MPs".

Tuesday's announcement marked the return of Shahrir to the cabinet after almost two decades. The last ministerial post he held was as federal territory minister in 1987.

Joining him in the new cabinet was another controversial figure, ex-Umno's Kota Bahru MP Zaid Ibrahim, now a senator. Both of them were seen as 'reformists' within the party.

Shahrir said he was informed by premier Abdullah at about 11am on Tuesday - an hour before Abdullah announced the line-up - but "I don't know what portfolio it was".

shahrir samad interview 180405 at workWith his new post, he would have to give up any hopes of retaining the Public Accounts Committee chair - a powerful parliamentary committee to ensure government's money are well-spent - as well as ownership in a golf equipment company that he was running in Kuala Lumpur.

When contacted on Tuesday night, the IT-savvy Shahrir - who has a blog and personal website - said he was busy replying to about 400 SMSes congratulating him.

Excerpts of the 30-minute interview:

**Malaysiakini: What is your immediate task as voters have shown their unhappiness through the ballot box over the rising cost of living?**

Shahrir: Firstly I will collect ideas from all the NGOs related to consumerism and I will ask them to submit their feedbacks. I am getting ready for this at the moment.

**You are an advocate for fuel subsidy to be cut back and that the petrol price should go up. With your new post, how are you going to address the concern over the anticipated fuel hike?**

Yes, I am an advocate for the petrol price to go up but with certain conditions. The real issue is that we must make sure that the subsidies go to the right people.

**A lot of people are taken by surprise with your appointment as you have been rather critical on the government.**

What I said (criticised) was actually what the government wants to do, it's all in the (election) manifesto of the party like issues of efficiency and integrity.

**What is the message on the appointments like you, Zaid Ibrahim or Amirsham A Aziz? Some analysts see it as the prime minister's efforts to bring reforms in the face of the public disenchantment?**

Certainly that message is clear and you don't expect a government's critic or the independent-minded MPs to be appointed in the government but surely we will bring in our values. At our age, if we have the same idealism and principle (before appointment), we will remain unchanged.

**Is it directly linked to the dismal electoral performance of the Barisan Nasional?**

If the results had been good or better, I think there would have been some changes (in the cabinet line-up) too.

**You have declined the offer for a ministerial post during the cabinet reshuffle in 2006. Why do you think the time is right for you to take up the post now?**

I have served one term as a backbencher (from 2004, after the political hiatus) and since I have said 'no' (to the offer) in the past, I shouldn't say no this time. I have to do national service now, especially at a time like this when we need much responsive and aggressive (ministers).

**Some nevertheless thought you should have been offered a higher position in the cabinet with your previous experience as a minister.**

Is this not as glamorous as you thought (laughs)?

**You said you were planning to retire and preferred not to contest in the last election?**

That was the consideration that I had since I don't have a succession plan (laughs).

**You always said that you preferred to be a backbencher because you think you can**

**do more sitting on the backbench.**

At that time I think I can do more being a backbencher. I want to show an example to other politicians, who think being a backbencher is not an option, that they can also perform and deliver by not holding public office, the same thing that I told Khairy (Jamaluddin). He seem to be quite happy to take that role as a backbencher.

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