

**Najib's calculated risk to exclude Khairy**  
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**Ong Kian Ming**

The first thought that came to mind upon reading the names in Najib Abdul Razak's new cabinet was – it could have been worse.

He dropped most of the ministers who were related to controversy or scandal in one way or another including Syed Hamid Albar (Home), Azalina Othman Said (Tourism) and Muhammad Muhammad Taib (Rural and Regional Development).

He did not include Jamaluddin Jarjis whom some speculated may have been tapped for the 2nd finance minister post - a position he formerly held under Dr Mahathir Mohamad's final cabinet. The speculation that controversial Pasir Salak MP, Tajuddin Abdul Rahman, may be included in the cabinet also failed to materialise.

For this, Najib has to be given some credit especially when one thinks back to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's first cabinet after the 2004 general elections when he failed to use the mandate given to him by the voters to shake up the composition of the cabinet by not appointing the likes of Rafidah Aziz, S Samy Vellu and Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor.

This is not to say that there is no one in Najib's first cabinet that is without a taint of scandal or controversy.

Noh Omar, associated with the infamous 'squat-gate' incident where he said foreigners who are not happy with Malaysia can go home, was promoted to agriculture and agro-based industries minister. Also the always unpredictable Mohamed Nazri Aziz retained his position as the de facto law and parliament minister in the PM's Department.

**Muhyiddin got a hot potato**

As expected, he retained Mustapa Mohamad (International Trade and Industry Ministry), whose skills as a technocrat and administrator are widely acknowledged and he brought in Awang Adek Hussein as a deputy finance minister, whose skills as a former Bank Negara high ranking official will be much needed during these times of economic turmoil.

There were not that many surprises in terms of the other ministers who were appointed. Najib does not have much of a choice in terms of the names that were proposed by leaders of the other BN component parties.

As expected, the MCA deputy president Dr Chua Soi Lek was not given a cabinet position. And neither did Samy Vellu despite being re-elected unopposed as MIC chief.

That Gerakan president Koh Tsu Koon was given a cabinet appointment via the senatorship route, should not be that surprising, given that his party, without a cabinet-level representation, was in danger of being seen as irrelevant on the national stage.

Bernard Dompok was given the plantation, industries and commodities portfolio, a promotion from his previous position as Minister in the PM's department.

Where Najib had greater flexibility was in the appointment of Umno leaders into the cabinet and the portfolios that were allocated to them. Here, the choices made by Najib were more for politically strategic reasons rather than with the intention of capturing the public's imagination.

Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin was given the hot potato that is the Education Ministry and one of his first tasks will be the announcement of changes to the policy of teaching Science and Maths in English, if there are any.

Hishammuddin Hussein was given the portfolio of home minister, an indication of the level of trust Najib has in him given the importance of this ministry if there is going to be a crackdown of any sort on the opposition or civil society activists.

Shafie Apdal was given a promotion with the rural and regional development portfolio and the remaining Umno VP, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi was given the important defense portfolio under which the National Service scheme sits.

To placate or reward Umno in Sabah, Anifah Aman, who rejected a deputy minister position after the March 2008 general election, was given the foreign minister position. Perhaps to placate Mahathir, Rais Yatim (Information, Communications, Arts and Culture) was retained as a cabinet minister despite losing his VP bid.

### **Strategically foolish to snub KJ**

But perhaps the biggest decision Najib had to make was whether or not to include recently elected Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin in his cabinet.

In the end, Najib made the decision not to include him but instead appointed Khairy's deputy, Razali Ibrahim as well as Mukhriz Mahathir - who came last in the Umno Youth race - as deputy ministers. But by making his intentions of alienating and sidelining Khairy known so early, Najib has taken a calculated risk that may come back to haunt him.

To most casual observers, Najib's decision to exclude Khairy from his cabinet will be interpreted as Najib giving in to the demands of Mahathir. This impression will only be strengthened by the fact that Mukhriz was given a deputy minister position despite being a first-term MP and holds no elected post in Umno.

Not only does this signal the fact that Najib seems to fear Mahathir, it also seems strategically foolish given that the former stongman's public influence seems to have waned, especially in light of the ineffectiveness of his last-minute interventions in Bukit Gantang and Bukit Selambau.

Najib must have figured that Mahathir was capable of doing much more harm to him in the short term than Khairy could, especially given that his father-in-law Abdullah is not the sort who would lash out publicly at Najib after his retirement.

Najib must have also thought he may gain some brownie points from the public by sidelining Khairy, who is arguably one of the most controversial and perhaps unpopular politicians within the ranks of Umno leaders.

But what Najib did not consider, or failed to give enough weight to, is the fact that Khairy could have been a potential ally and weapon which he could use against the opposition in

the longer term, especially in the lead up to the next general election.

Najib could have easily given Khairy a deputy minister position in the Youth and Sports Ministry as well as giving Mukhriz a deputy minister position. This way, he could have placated Mahathir to some degree but still signal his own independence. More importantly, he would be keeping the option open of using Khairy as an ally and weapon against the opposition.

One has to remember that Khairy had already signaled his intention to build a more inclusive BN Youth before the Umno Youth elections. By not even giving him a deputy minister position, Najib has made Khairy much less of an effective advocate for this position, especially when one considers that in the context of BN Youth meetings, Khairy would be speaking to other Youth leaders who are deputy ministers, including his own deputy in Umno Youth.

A more inclusive sounding Umno and BN Youth could have been the kind of start the BN needs to make a dent in the Youth vote, which has been trending, and will continue to trend, towards the opposition.

The opposition must be breathing a sigh of relief knowing that Khairy has and will continue to be sidelined as long as Najib is in power. While Khairy will not lash out against Najib in public and will play the role of a loyal Umno Youth chief, in private, there are no incentives for Khairy to go all out to support Najib's premiership.

While it is true that the opposition could have used Khairy as a person which they could all target and would be a reminder to everyone of Abdullah's failed administration, Khairy has shown enough flexibility in his Umno Youth campaign that indicated that he could have been the BN's biggest asset in trying to regain back the youth vote.

Instead, this task now falls to Shabery Cheek, the new youth and sports minister and his deputy, Razali Ibrahim, the new Umno Youth deputy chief. While Shabery has shown his willingness to engage with the new media when he invited several prominent bloggers to appear on RTM soon after the 2008 general election, he cannot identify with the younger generation in the same way that Khairy can, given the generation gap between the two.

### **A return to 'Mahathirism'?**

To sum up, Najib's new cabinet certainly does not have a 'wow' factor but neither does it evoke the same type of negative reactions as Abdullah's first cabinet after the 2004 general election. I would give him cabinet a 'B' grade for meeting but not exceeding expectations it.

Some of this is not Najib's fault entirely given the names that were proposed to him were from the other BN component parties.

His choice of not including Khairy in the cabinet and giving Mukhriz a deputy minister position will be interpreted as another step along the path of a return to "Mahathirism" and distancing himself from Abdullah's administration. But he has taken a big risk and one which I think where the costs may potentially outweigh the benefits.

At the end of the day, Najib still has to lead the country as the PM. It will still be up to him to dictate the major decisions which his administration will have to take to get the country back onto the path of economic and perhaps political stability.

No matter what grade the cabinet receives from analysts or casual observers alike, the cabinet still has to look to Najib for direction and leadership. Najib has indeed a long road ahead of him.

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