



HARD TO READ: Political circles are abuzz with talk of a Cabinet reshuffle next month that may affect even Rafidah but Abdullah is keeping things close to his chest. — *Bernamapic*

Reshuffle in September?

A Cabinet reshuffle seems imminent and some are expecting it to take place as early as September, writes JOCELINE TAN

DATUK Mustapa Mohamad's press aide has received more telephone calls and SMS messages than usual in past weeks.

No prizes for guessing, but the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department is a "hot name" in the latest round of speculation of a Cabinet reshuffle.

Mustapa's aide, Juhaidi Yean Abdullah, is more than used to such queries.

Catch Juhaidi on a lighted-hearted day, and he is likely to joke that his minister has been speculated about for so many Cabinet posts that if they had materialised, "my boss would be holding his seventh or eighth portfolio by now."

Mustapa, a first-class honours economics graduate of Melbourne University, is reportedly quite immune to such talk about his political career.

Several months ago, Juhaidi had casually mentioned to him one such speculation.

Mustapa had just looked at him and went on with what he was doing.

"Without saying anything, he was telling me a lot. He's not the type to push himself into the limelight and he doesn't go for all this talk about what might or might not happen," said Juhaidi.

It is possible that talk about Mustapa is being passed around because it is understood that his ministry has been asked to help oversee the review and monitoring of the AP system as well the formulation of the National Automotive Policy.

But more than that, a Cabinet reshuffle is, apparently, on the horizon.

"Is that what they're saying? Let me tell you, I'm sure the Prime Minister is enjoying the way people are speculating left, right and centre as though they know what he is going to do," said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

Syed Hamid insists he has no

inkling despite having greater access to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi than most other ministers, and having accompanied the Premier on numerous overseas trips.

"I would not dream of asking him. Even my own appointments in the past have been surprises," said the Johor politician.

Nevertheless, some are anticipating a reshuffle as early as September.

"A minor one soon and a bigger one next year," said a source.

The view that there is likely to be "a minor one soon" is based on the argument that there are a number of posts where the administration cannot afford to wait any further.

"The circumstances do not permit a delay," said political insider Datuk Annuar Zaini.

One of these posts is that of Federal Territory Minister, currently held by Tan Sri Abdul Isa Mohd Samad.

The outcome of Isa's appeal against a six-year suspension for election misconduct in the party polls last year will only be known on Aug 24 and he is not expected to get off scot-free.

Most expect his punishment to be reduced by half, effectively rendering him out of action until after the next party election.

The reshuffle, it is said, will also accommodate the fallout from the MCA and Gerakan elections this and next weekend respectively.

The crowded race in the MCA polls is bound to result in a few casualties among those holding government posts.

As for Gerakan, Datuk Seri Kerk Choo Ting may not be able to hold on to his post of Deputy Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Minister if he loses in the party polls.

But the question on everyone's lips is whether the Prime Minister will retain Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz in the Cabinet after the AP fiasco.

"It's difficult to argue in her favour. She has lost credibility in her own party and her explanation (on the AP issue) has not gone down well at every level, be it the party, the public and according to recent reports, even the Cabinet," said Annuar, who is also *Bernama* chairman.

At the same time, there are those who are convinced Rafidah will remain in the Cabinet, that she will survive this round of reshuffle.

"You have to remember that she is still the Wanita Umno leader and the women in the party are still with her," said one of her Wanita exco members.

The decision is the Prime Minister's to make but the jury, it seems,

is still out on the question of Rafidah.

Interestingly enough, speculation about the fate of the three ministers who lost their Umno supreme council seats in the party elections last September seems to have fizzled out.

The defeat of Datuk Kadir Sheikh Fadzil (Information), Datuk Azmi Khalid (Home Affairs) and Datuk Shafie Salleh (Higher Education) had sparked off talk earlier this year that they would be replaced in a reshuffle.

This was despite the fact that the then Cabinet was barely a year old.

The speculation was quite obviously fuelled by ambitious and impatient elements in the party.

But even now, there are those who think that the Prime Minister will do a major rather than a minor reshuffle now.

They say there is no real reason for Abdullah to wait till next year before going for big changes.

Ambitious and impatient voices speaking again?

Actually, there are some rather good reasons why a big reshuffle is on the cards, if not soon, then next year.

The current Cabinet, said Federal Territory Umno Youth chief Datuk Norza Zakaria, reflects the continuity between the former and current

administrations.

"It's time for an Abdullah Cabinet which comprises people who reflect Pak Lah's values and who can work with him in word and deed," said Norza.

Abdullah often reminds his party leaders of the need to "*jaga maruah*" to be vigilant about upholding their dignity and that of the party they represent.

Values like integrity and honesty carry weight with Abdullah and will be important criteria for those intending to be in the team.

A more substantial reshuffle is likely closer to the mid-term of Abdullah's mandate, that is, around the middle of next year.

"It's only one-and-a-half-years since he formed his Cabinet. A major reshuffle now would not be seemly. Besides, he is still assessing who are his team-mates," said a senior Umno figure.

By then, Annuar suggested, the Premier would be able to assess the performance of his team as well as the potential ability of those waiting in the wings.

"Pak Lah has to bring in new and younger talent to be groomed and tested. They will form the backbone of his team that will take the Barisan Nasional into the next general election," said Annuar.

More important, this team will have to implement the Ninth Malaysia Plan, which will be tabled in Parliament by the first quarter of next year.

The Prime Minister, said those predicting a September reshuffle, is likely to announce the changes before the fasting month in early October.

It will not be an easy decision to make and some suggest that is why it may be made before the start of fasting.

The fasting month is a time for self-reflection regardless of whether one comes out for better or worse in politics.