

Getting the right players for a winning team

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■ Comment by Kalimullah Hassan

FOR months, the Press had been speculating on the Cabinet reshuffle. They hyped themselves, worked up the politicians and the market, and finally when the reshuffle was announced yesterday, the response was, at best, muted.

Muted because their expectations had been built up; muted because they thought that there would be massive changes, particularly the exit of old-timers like Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu and Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz; and muted because old faces like Datuk Effendi Norwawi and Tengku Adnan Mansor were brought back instead of younger faces being promoted.

But the build-up was a result of the politicians and Press trying to get into the mind of the Prime Minister and trying to out-think him.

The build-up was because they had their own wish list and hence, when they did not get their three wishes, they felt short-changed.

Sure, everyone has a right to draw up their own dream team. But in the end, only one man decides, based on his own expectations, his own plans and his own special knowledge of the people he works with — the Prime Minister himself.

Could Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi have done better? Maybe.

But was the team he announced bad? Definitely not.

Given the constraints that he has, due to coalition party principles and geographical considerations, there was little Abdullah could do to match expectations of seeing some long-serving party chiefs retired.

Dr Lim, Samy Vellu and Rafidah are good ministers.

But for Abdullah's plans to get the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP) to be the kicker for the second half of the vision to see Malaysia achieving developed nation status by 2020, he needs experienced hands to manage the programmes. (Vision 2020 was launched in 1990.)

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But certainly, in the next two years, as the 9MP gets under way, there are many promising second-echelon leaders who will be moving towards full ministerial status.

And when the success of the initial years would be crucial for laying the foundation for the coming 15 years, should Abdullah have gambled on new faces for the crucial ministries?

If, say, the chief executive officer of a Mesdaq company is embarking on a major exercise which would bring his company into the ranks of the blue chips, should he allow an assistant general manager to lead



STAYING POWER: The skills of old hands such as Samy Vellu, Lim and Rafidah continue to be in demand.

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the exercise just because the executive director has been on the job a long time?

But if the executive director were an under-performer, the only natural thing would be to replace him.

As in the case of Rafidah, for example, Abdullah made it clear that in the 9MP period, when a slew of FTAs and other trade initiatives are being negotiated and launched, he would need the Iron Lady as she knows her subject well and could, in his words, "hit the ground running".

Approved Permits controversy or not, Rafidah has always excelled in her portfolio and she is still needed.

Likewise, when Higher Education Minister Datuk Shafie Salleh continued with his spats with the vice-chancellors of universities and plans to expand higher education standards were moving sluggishly, he was removed and replaced by the more meticulous, consensus-building and amiable Datuk Mustapa Mohamed.

And when Datuk Dr Leo Michael Toyad, a decent person, was lacklustre in the Tourism Ministry — a major revenue source for the country — as compared to his flamboyant and workaholic predecessor Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, he, too, had to make way for Tengku Adnan Mansor, a veteran with previous Cabinet experience.

And where Mustapa's meticulous, consensus-building style had

turned the economic planning agencies under him into slow-moving lumbering giants, Abdullah placed the entrepreneurial Effendi who can make faster decisions and well-placed judgments.

Mustapa's skills are key to the Higher Education Ministry as Abdullah pushes for greater capacity-building. Adnan's more outgoing style, compared to Dr Toyad's reticence and introvertedness, would be better for the tourism ministry.

In the Federal Territories Ministry, Datuk Zulhasnan Rafique was probably the most apt choice as he has been there many years and as an MP from the FT, has a sound knowledge of issues and problems.

The appointment of Information Minister Datuk Zainuddin Maidin, perhaps, was made because of his journalistic background in *Utusan Malaysia*.

It was certainly not made on the basis of his age because Zainuddin falls into the same age bracket as Dr Lim and Samy Vellu and is older than Rafidah.

Zainuddin, since his elevation as deputy minister of information, has had an uneasy relationship with senior executives of some of the mainstream media.

It is ironic that just a day before his appointment was announced, Zainuddin sought the sacking of the top editors of the New Straits Times Group in a closed-door Umno information bureau meeting.

It was to Umno information chief Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib's credit that he politely informed Zainuddin that he had chosen the wrong forum to vent his hostility on the media, and it was to the credit of the majority of the bureau — except for a senator from Johor and an assemblyman from Kelantan — that they did not embrace Zainuddin's views.

Zainuddin has had run-ins with other media executives, partly because he sees himself as editor of the Malaysian media. There is no such position.

Abdullah has made it one of the cornerstones of his administration that the Press be given leeway and more freedom, as long as they do not cross the boundaries of inciting race and religious hatred.

There are laws in place, in any circumstances, which ensure that the Malaysian Press does not take the route of the free-wheeling sham freedom that the Danish and European media claim to uphold, as seen in the recent case of the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad.

And as the *China Press*, *Sarawak Tribune* and *Guang Ming* editors and publishers found out, Abdullah, as Internal Security Minister, will not spare the rod when the boundaries are crossed.

But then again, Abdullah has placed his reputation and that of his administration on the line with his new Cabinet. Their performance will ensure whether the Barisan Nasional wins as convincingly in 2009 as it did in 2004.

And if they do not perform — whether new or old — their shelf-lives may be as short, or even shorter, than those of Shafie and Dr Toyad.

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