

PM's choice stuns veterans

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JUST hours before Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi called for a press conference at 2.45pm yesterday to announce his new Cabinet line-up, a senior minister telephoned to give his prediction of how the list would shape up.

The politician, claiming that his assessment was based on various sources, boldly stated that the political position of International Trade and Industries Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz was in limbo. In short, the Wanita Umno chief would be dropped.

He was wrong. Not just on Rafidah but on a few other names as well.

Another senior minister exclaimed "What?" five times when told that Datuk Dr Leo Michael Toyad had lost his job as tourism minister.

The Prime Minister kept the list close to his chest until the last minute. The ministers had no hints and it would not be wrong to say that they had to find out from the TV.

Shortly before noon, the Anti-Corruption Agency provided the Prime Minister the result of their checks on his new Cabinet members. They passed the test but he will be watching them.



COMMENT

By WONG CHUN WAI

"I will be pushing them. I will make sure that they implement the Ninth Malaysia Plan. If that is okay, the election will take care of itself. It's full steam ahead," he told a group of editors, two hours after the press conference.

Looking relaxed now that a big burden had been lifted off his shoulders, he joked and asked for the journalists' assessment of the Cabinet, saying that he had been mulling over some names for months.

"It's not something I work out (from air). It has been in my mind. I have to get a team for the Ninth Malaysia Plan," he said. In fact, the 9MP was the key word that dominated the entire discussion.

The 9MP, to be tabled in Parliament on March 31, is regarded as the blueprint of the country's development for the next five years. For Pak Lah, time is not on Malaysia's side, especially with intense competition mounting from its neighbours.

The biggest question in the public's mind must be why Rafidah had been picked again to head the International Trade and Industries Ministry (Miti) following last year's controversy over the issue of Approved Permit for car import, which went down badly with a majority of delegates at the Umno general assembly.

It is clear that Abdullah needed her experience and expertise, even if there are others who can do the job. Known for her feisty approach, the Iron Lady was regarded by the Prime Minister as "the best man" for the job.

She needs no training and with Malaysia in a hurry, the choice was obvious. National interest, rather than narrow party interest, was the main consideration. Those close to the PM said the boss had made it clear that "Miti is not about AP and AP is not everything."

Another surprise is Datuk Effendi Norwawi, the former agriculture minister, who dropped out mid-way for health reasons but Abdullah wanted him back because of his corporate and financial background. He is said to have given much input in the draw-

ing up of the 9MP, which is now into its third draft.

There were speculations that Agriculture Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin would be moved out but Abdullah wanted him to remain as the administration has placed priority on agriculture, saying that it was a central pillar to the economy.

Pak Lah wants to modernise the agriculture sector and it will get a bigger allocation under the 9MP.

Another surprise was the promotion of Datuk Zainuddin Maidin to Information Minister. But regarded more as a professional newsman than a politician, the job suits him perfectly.

A leader who makes no bones of his unhappiness with extremism of any form, the former *Utusan Malaysia* chief editor speaks his mind, but with his new position, he needs to adjust to the bigger responsibilities that come with it.

Many had expected Toyad to be shifted to another ministry but dropping him completely stunned many, even his Cabinet colleagues. A low-profile person, his appointment to the tourism portfolio two years ago had not gone down well with many.

His predecessor Datuk Seri Kadir Sheikh Fadzir was flamboyant and his deputy Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen had first class public relations, which made the pair bigger than life. Toyad had a tough time living up to their reputation and now the job has fallen to Putrajaya MP Datuk Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, regarded as "gung ho" by his boss.

But even for the Prime Minister, with all the powers vested in him, it was clear that he did not have a complete free hand. It was a list which was influenced by political and even geographical factors, taking into account representation from the states.

Besides Umno, he had to consider representation from the 14 component parties of Barisan Nasional, whose leaders had made recommendations.

The hallmark of BN is its power-sharing concept, which has made Malaysia a model of how a government works in a plural society with various sensitivities. This has also contributed to the size of the Government.

By tradition and convention, the heads of component parties, especially the key ones, are

automatically full ministers.

But not every Malaysian will be pleased with the line-up. There will be many who had expected some old guards to be dropped, believing they have overstayed and that Malaysia has enough capable people to replace them.

Some may even question the credibility of certain politicians, which is a norm in a democratic country. After all, no one should swallow everything announced by the Government.

Still, the line-up has been decided and for Abdullah, people will always have flaws. But where government policies are concerned, Pak Lah will have to make sure that there are as few flaws as possible.

These political considerations would certainly have been taken into account when Abdullah drew up the list. Other talented leaders could have been included, but this is *realpolitik*.

Everyone in the Cabinet is now regarded by the Prime Minister as the "drivers of growth" for the nation's progress and development. They can be sure that he will crack the whip this time.