

Changes focus on grooming second echelon of leaders

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THE big wave rolled in at the level of deputy ministers, sweeping in six new faces and shuffling eight existing deputies.

It was evident the Prime Minister's focus in this mid-term reshuffle was on the second echelon of the Government, the group which will form the next frontline for his Barisan Nasional team.

If one has to describe Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's likely priority in the new lineup, it is about grooming the next echelon and, more importantly, putting them to the test.

It is a forward-looking set of changes and Abdullah has his eye on the future.

The new faces among the deputy ministers include one of MCA's most promising figures, Datuk Liow Tiong Lai.

The Bentong MP and MCA Youth chief also epitomises the new breed of MCA leaders, as proficient in Bahasa Malaysia as they are in Chinese and English.

At 45, he is also the youngest among the new set of deputies.

Liow cut his political teeth as political secretary to former MCA No 2 Tan Sri Lim Ah Lek and has long enjoyed a reputation as a grassroots man with strong networking skills.

Four former parliamentary secretaries appointed after the last general election saw swift promotion to deputy minister.

They are Datuk Johari Baharum (Internal Security), Ng Lip Yong (International Trade and Industry), Datuk Zainal Abidin Osman (Rural and Regional Development) and Datuk Abu Seman Yusop (Federal Territory).

Johari, 52, is the MP for Kubang Pasu and former political secretary to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The Kedah politician is soft-spoken and maintains a low profile despite his reputation as the brains behind the political momentum that led to the resignation of former Kedah Menteri

Besar Tan Sri Sanusi Junid.

Ng, 56, is in his third term as Batu MP. He is an engineer by profession and is known in Gerakan as someone who does not mince his words.

First-term Nibong Tebal MP Zainal is an up-and-coming politician in Penang who has been noted as someone with ideas and opinions.

He is only 46 and is known among his constituents as Datuk 'Non Panjang because of his lanky frame.

Negri Sembilan's Abu Seman, 62, and former Parit Buntar MP Datuk Abdul Rahman Suliman, also in his 60s, are two senior additions to the crop of deputy ministers.

Three deputy ministers were dropped to make way - Gerakan's Datuk Seri Kerk Choo Ting and Umno's Datuk Mahadzir Khir and Tengku Putera Tengku Awang.

Kerk lost his party's confidence after he challenged and lost the contest for the party

presidency whereas Mahadzir had to struggle to recover from a crippling stroke for much of the previous year.

The reshuffle of the eight existing deputy ministers is seen as a move to broaden their experience in Government; they include three Umno politicians - Datuk Dr Awang Adek Hussin (Rural and Regional Development to Finance), Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (Tourism to Information) and Datuk Noh Omar (Internal Security to Education).

"It's part of the grooming process so that they will have as wide an experience as possible," said political insider Datuk Annuar Zaini.

The Finance Ministry has become a much-coveted office over the years and Dr Awang Adek's appointment as its new deputy speaks of the Prime Minister's confidence in him.

The 51-year-old politician who hails from the poverty-stricken district of Bachok,

Kelantan, is one of those classic cases of "poor boy makes good."

He holds a PhD in Economics from an Ivy League university in the United States and left his job in Bank Negara to enter full-time politics.

In Noh's case, his stint in Internal Security has been less than sterling and his move to Education is seen as a setback.

Three MCA and two Gerakan politicians were also affected by the change.

It is understood that the MCA's Datuk Fu Ah Kiow was moved from Education to Internal Security because the latter post called for someone who reads and speaks Chinese.

The other MCA politicians affected are Datuk Ong Tee Keat (Youth and Sports to Higher Education) and Datuk Donald Lim (Information to Tourism).

The Gerakan politicians affected are Datuk Chia Kwang Chia (Internal Security to Information) and Datuk Mah Siew Keong (International Trade and

Industry to Agriculture and Agro-based Industries).

Chia, 54, is a rising star in Gerakan and his growing experience in the Government will lend added clout to his rise in the party.

Two new faces also came in as parliamentary secretaries - Kemaman MP Ahmad Shabery Chik and Senator Dr S. Vijayarajam who is also Gerakan vice-president.

Shabery, 47, a first-term MP, has shone in Parliament as a backbencher and came into the Prime Minister's radar as early as a year ago.

In fact, when Barisan Backbenchers Club chairman Datuk Shahrir Samad heard about Shabery's promotion, he said: "What a pity, we shall miss him as a spokesman in Parliament."

The second echelon will now have to run the race as best as they can if they want to be in a position to take over the baton in a few years' time.