

PM has eye on the big picture

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Analysis by JOCELINE TAN

DATUK Seri Rafidah Aziz was all smiles as she emerged from her International Trade and Industry Ministry office at about 5pm.

She had spent the entire afternoon huddled in a meeting with top Tenaga Nasional officials.

But one thing was clear that day - the minister was in a fantastically good mood, her face lit up by a brilliant smile for much of the meeting.

Even a power blackout in the middle of the meeting did not dampen her mood.

"She didn't stop smiling from the point she stepped out of the lift, and even as her Perdana drove away," said one of the reporters waiting for her comment on the Cabinet reshuffle.

And why not? Shortly after the meeting began, the Prime Minister had announced live on TV that she was one of the ministers retained in his Cabinet line-up.

In fact, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had telephoned several hours earlier to inform the senior minister that she was still on his team.

The year 2005 has been Rafidah's *annus horribilis*, no thanks to the explosive Approved Permits, or AP issue.

But as the Prime Minister told a press conference in Putrajaya, Rafidah was still needed in the Cabinet because of her vast experience.

Rafidah, despite the uproar over her handling of the APs, is quite indispensable.

The Iron Lady may not be the most popular person in the party but she is respected and trusted by those in the industry.

It is possible that Rafidah's retention in the Cabinet stirred the greatest interest, at least among the business sector.

After months of keeping people guessing and speculating

about the when and who of his Cabinet reshuffle, the Prime Minister still managed to surprise everyone with his line-up.

Of the seven new ministerial appointments, it is likely that half of them came as a surprise - even shock - to many.

The least surprising appointment was that of Datuk Zulhasnan Rafique, who moved from Deputy Federal Territory Minister to a full Minister.

The appointment more or less establishes Zulhasnan, 52, as a man to watch in Umno politics. The Setiawangsa MP has been a long-time loyalist of Abdullah.

The most surprising were probably the appointments of Datuk Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor as Tourism Minister and Datuk Seri Effendi Norwawi as Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Tengku Adnan was a former minister and Federal Territory Umno strongman while Effendi is the former Agriculture Minister and a business wizard.

Their comebacks were least expected.

Abdullah was also probably aware of how younger, aspiring politicians on the ground would resent top places being filled by retired faces and he took pains to explain why he brought these two veterans back.

He wanted the benefit of their experience, energy and ability to deliver.

In the case of the appointment of Datuk Zainuddin Maidin as the new Information Minister, it was the man himself who was most taken aback.

Zainuddin was on the way to an official function when a retired civil servant friend of his called to congratulate him.

"Honestly, I had no hint from anyone," he said.

But he had some inkling that his former boss Datuk Kadir Sheikh Fadzir would not be staying on because he had said at several gatherings and meet-



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ings that "if I have made any mistakes, please forgive me," a practice common among Muslims.

Kadir had informed the Prime Minister of his desire to make

way weeks earlier and announced it live on TV yesterday.

Zainuddin is a veteran newsman whom many had written off as on the way out. But few who know him doubt that he

will give this new posting all that he has got.

Datuk Seri Azmi Khalid's move from Home Affairs to Natural Resources and Environment was also a surprise.

The 64-year-old Perlis politician had not only failed to secure a spot on the party supreme council, but had relinquished his division head post last year, leading many to speculate that he had reached the end of the road.

The joke among some yesterday was that his beautiful new wife Datin Seri Normala Shamsuddin as well as Effendi's actress wife Datin Seri Tiara Jacqueline would provide the "glam factor" among the Cabinet wives.

Incoming Higher Education Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed is expected to bring his intellectual and consultative style to the ministry, which is seen as a core ministry in ensuring top quality human resources for the future.

Datuk Radzi Sheikh Ahmad's appointment has been described by some as a blast from the past. A Pak Lah loyalist from way back, he is trusted and enjoys the implicit confidence of the Prime Minister.

He is also someone who works hard from behind the scenes.

Those trying to understand the Prime Minister's rationale behind the changes must remember that his decisions are not solely based on qualifications, ability and performance.

Party politics is about compromise and consensus and he has to accommodate the interests not only of his own party but that of the component parties who worked together to bring him the biggest mandate ever won by a prime minister in the general election.

From where he sits, he has to make the changes according to the big picture and not only to narrow political demands.

Said political insider Datuk Annuar Zaini: "He has repositioned his top players and also prepared a reserve of younger players."