

Time for a change of players?

The guessing game may soon be over as the Prime Minister is said to be in the final stages of deciding on changes to his Cabinet. But opinions about whether it will be a major or minor reshuffle vary, writes JOCELINE TAN

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DATUK Annuar Zaini's football analogy for the impending Cabinet reshuffle seems to have captured the imagination of many.

Annuar, who is also Bernama chairman, had likened Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to the team manager, the Cabinet to the football team and the expected reshuffle as half-time in the game.

"The first half of the game is about over and it's now nearing half-time. Time to make some changes," said Annuar.

His analogy has caught on particularly given that the European football season or what some call the "gila-gila bola" season is now in full swing.

"This is the time the team manager will substitute players ... people who are not playing well, lost their stamina or who are injured. Or he may reposition the players," Annuar added.

So will the team manager be making major changes at half-time?

Said Annuar rather enigmatically: "Big, small or medium, it's all very subjective. How the manager reads the game can be quite different from the expectations of the spectators."

For that matter, the team manager himself has been difficult to read.

Abdullah has kept the reshuffle plans close to his chest.

It has been a mother of all headaches, trying to second-guess the Prime Minister, so much so that some in Umno Youth have begun referring to the reshuffle as "Rahsia besar Pak Lah" (Pak Lah's big secret).

Predictions that the Prime Minister would announce the reshuffle late last year had resulted in egg on the face of those doing the predicting. It has been very embarrassing, especially for the journalists involved.

But as political insider Annuar said, now is about half-time and many are convinced that the reshuffle will take place very soon.

"It's around the corner," said a top aide to a minister.

Said another ministerial aide: "The general view is that it's overdue."

This time around, those in the political loop are convinced that it is going to take place very soon.

Abdullah hinted as much when inspecting the floods situation in Terengganu several weeks ago.

He confirmed there would be a reshuffle and that if it did not happen in December then it would take place in January.

Like many of his Cabinet members, the No 1 took a family holiday abroad

towards the year end.

Many of his party members assumed he would spend his holiday thinking about the reshuffle but the family man in him probably turned his attention entirely to his family during the break.

Other ministers on their own vacations probably spent more time thinking about the reshuffle than him, particularly about whether they would be affected.

Abdullah returned from abroad on Jan 1 and is still on leave.

He is said to be using the time away from the office to seriously dwell on the Cabinet changes needed to take the Barisan Nasional into the next general election.

But the 64-million-dollar-question still remains: Is the Prime Minister looking at a major or minor reshuffle?

One would have thought that after so many months speculating on the reshuffle and trying to read into Abdullah's words and statements, people would be more enlightened.

"Better not ask me, I'm also confused. The PM is tougher to read than Dr Mahathir," said a senior Cabinet member.

Names of who may rise or fall or who is moving where have been talked and written about but a great deal of it is still largely speculation and conjecture.

And it explains why opinions about the nature of the changes vary so dramatically.

One school of thought is convinced that the reshuffle will be big with some pretty senior names being dropped.

Despite the fact that Abdullah replaced a total of five full ministers when he formed his Cabinet after the general election, this group is of the view that there are still too many top figures who have overstayed.

For instance, this group thinks that International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz should pay the price for the AP issue.

"I think most people, especially those in Umno, are expecting a major Cabinet reshuffle. They gave him a strong mandate, so why not use it," said a think-tank figure.

The other school of thought insists it would be so minor that it would not even constitute a reshuffle, that it would just be about filling in vacancies and moving people around at levels below that of the minister.

One obvious ministry to fill is the Federal Territories post and the money seems to be on the current deputy moving up.



TOUGH TO READ: Abdullah has kept plans of his Cabinet reshuffle close to his chest, and views about it vary widely.

The senior faces, this group insist, will likely stay put and that includes Rafidah because the Wanita Umno chief, warts and all, is still unparalleled as trade minister.

This group argues that there are only about a dozen or so Cabinet members who can be considered senior members and there is no pressing need to replace them.

The Prime Minister really has people flummoxed about his plans.

According to another Cabinet member, the criteria that Abdullah applies will be based on performance and function rather than pure political considerations.

"I see him addressing the problem of over-lapping functions and powers. He's very concerned about the efficiency of his ministries.

"I don't see him dropping any senior faces either.

"They form the senior tier and any PM needs that sort of experience alongside newer faces in the second

and third echelon," said the minister.

A source close to the Prime Minister's office added: "It's not about how long they have been around but how they have performed. The PM has been keeping tabs on their work and performance."

Abdullah has, from the start of his administration, stressed that party posts should not be associated with government posts and he stuck to his conviction by retaining the three Umno ministers who lost in the Umno supreme council contest in 2004.

He knew he was going against the tide, for the Umno ground wanted Datuk Azmi Khalid (Home Affairs), Datuk Shafie Salleh (Higher Education) and Datuk Paduka Kadir Sheikh Fadzir (Information) to be replaced.

But he wanted to send a strong message against the way some Umno politicians used whatever means to secure a party post.

Abdullah will have to grapple with

this dilemma now.

Can he afford to ignore the ground feeling and retain all three or will he try to strike a balance?

Said a top Putrajaya official: "Essentially, this Cabinet reshuffle is about getting the right fit. It's important that ministers really perform in their roles otherwise it compromises efficiency and the delivery system.

"The PM will want to put the right people in the right ministry because that is what's going to drive the administration in the right direction."

When Abdullah came to power in 2003, he had captured the national imagination when he urged people to "work with me."

He not only needs a Cabinet that can work with him but one which can take his ideas and the policies of his administration to the next level.

And that is necessary if, as political insider Annuar said, "the Prime Minister wants to win the game when the whistle blows."