

# Mat Taib for Cabinet post?

The Star - 23/11/2006



COMMENT

By JOCELINE TAN

WHEN Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib's appointment as Senator was announced on the final day of the Umno general assembly, there was a loud burst of applause from the floor.

The Umno information chief is very well liked and the congratulations he received later that day were numerous and, more importantly, genuine.

Muhammad, or Mat Taib as he is known, is a true-blue Umno man.

Despite his reputation as the most powerful man in Selangor during the nineties, Mat Taib has been first and foremost a grassroots politician known for his humble and helpful ways.

But even as they congratulated him, many were also wondering whether that meant he would soon join the Cabinet.

For several months now, there has been talk that Rural and Regional Development Minister Datuk Aziz Shamsuddin was no longer keen to stay on in the Cabinet.

As such, the timing of Muhammad's appointment to the Senate seems more than pure coincidence, particularly given that the Prime Minister has neither denied nor confirmed the speculation.

Politics is very much about timing and the time seems to have come for Muhammad.

The senatorship had been talked about since early this year after Kuala Langat MP Datuk Shafie Salleh was dropped from the Cabinet in the February reshuffle.

It left Selangor without representation in the Cabinet although the state Barisan Nasional made a clean sweep of the 22 parliamentary seats. Of these, 10 were Umno MPs.

Apart from Aziz who is Shah

Alam MP (but whose division is in Perak), the state has two deputy ministers and a parliamentary secretary, all of whom are still learning the ropes while the rest are largely first-timers.

It can be summed up as the Selangor factor and explains why the Prime Minister is seriously looking at Muhammad.

Apart from his vast administrative experience, he has been loyal to the party despite being stripped of his Mentri Besar post after the Brisbane scandal.

"He went through trying times. He had a very publicised life and fell from so high. But he was patient, carried on with his work and stayed loyal to the party. I think he has passed the test and redeemed himself," said Johor Baru MP Datuk Shahrir Samad.

Or as an aide to a minister put it: "I see the PM asking himself three questions about Mat Taib. One, will he perform? Two, will he be loyal? Three, is he aligned to Tun Mahathir? If the answer is two yes' and one no, then Mat Taib is right for the job."

Some are even talking rather dramatically about the "return of Tan Sri Mat Taib" to Selangor politics, that he is being brought back to counter the growing influence of Datuk Seri Dr Khir Toyo in Selangor.

But that is unlikely. Gone are the days when they used to call him "Mike Tyson" because of his political invincibility and the macho buzz-cut hairdo that he used to sport.

He has been out of electoral

politics for two general elections.

Although he still cuts a dashing figure (he is 61), his hair has turned salt-and-pepper and he is realistic about his politics.

The political warlords from his era are still around but a new generation of Umno members has also emerged and they have their own loyalties.

Moreover, his post as Senator is at the pleasure of his party boss Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

And according to Selangor Umno Youth deputy chief Faisal Abdullah, Dr Khir and Muhammad have a great working relationship.

"Some people would like to see them clash but they get along and are constantly in touch with each other," said Faisal.

Muhammad, said Faisal, is like an elder brother to Dr Khir although Dr Khir is the state Umno liaison chief and Muhammad his No 2.

Dr Khir made it a point to attend Muhammad's personal Raya open house as well as the latter's Kelana Jaya Raya gathering last Friday night.

The Mentri Besar had an evening state exco meeting that lasted till past midnight, after which he rushed over to Kelana Jaya, arriving at Muhammad's gathering at 12.50am.

"We need someone strong like Tan Sri Mat Taib at the federal level. He will be the Selangor voice," said Faisal.

Umno being Umno, speculation will continue about where Muhammad is headed and its impact on Selangor Umno.

And whatever those outside may think of the "return of Tan Sri Mat Taib", party members see it as a fitting conclusion for a true-blue Umno man.