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Cabinet surprises

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PUTRAJAYA: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi yesterday sprung a few surprises in his cabinet line-up, dropping long-serving minister and Umno Wanita chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and bringing in lawyer Datuk Zaid Ibrahim to steer the process of judicial reform.

Other surprise inclusions were that of outspoken Johor Baru MP Datuk Shahrir Samad, who last served as a minister in 1986 and quit as Backbenchers Club chairman two years ago after supporting an opposition motion in parliament over the closed-one-eye MP issue, and former Selangor mentri besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, who was not fielded in the election.

Aside from Rafidah, another seven incumbent ministers who had won the March 8 polls were dropped from the list.

They are Datuk Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis, Datuk Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, Datuk Seri Azmi Khalid, Datuk Seri Radzi Sheikh Ahmad and Datuk Dr Abdullah Md Zin.

MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting and vice-president Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn are also out. Ong had said he would not hold any post in the new cabinet because of the party's poor performance in the polls while Fong has been rendered ineligible due to the party constitution.

At a packed press conference yesterday, Abdullah said his administration now has 68 members instead of 90 (ministers, deputy ministers and parliamentary secretaries), with half of them being new faces.

The prime minister has scrapped the post of parliamentary secretary, forcing ministers and deputy ministers to answer questions in Parliament. There were 20 parliamentary secretaries in the last administration.

He also reduced the number of ministries from 27 to 26 by merging Home and Internal Security Ministries as Home Ministry - back to the same situation four years back - as he said there have been some overlapping of jurisdictions.

The 32-minister line-up which had received the consent of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong earlier yesterday, saw 16 new

names, including seven fresh ones and nine promotions.

Said Abdullah: "The new cabinet reflects the power-sharing and consensus spirit within Barisan Nasional (BN). And I am confident this line-up is capable of implementing the government's agenda properly and effectively."

In his press conference, Abdullah spoke on why he included Zaid and former Maybank chief executive officer Datuk Amirsham A. Aziz, as ministers in the Prime Minister's Department.

Zaid, the former Kota Baru MP, was convicted of political corruption in 2006 and suspended for 18 months after refusing to apologise to the party disciplinary board. However, he had in recent years spoken out strongly on human rights and judicial reform matters, endearing him to non-governmental organisations.

"Zaid will be responsible for legal matters and will be tasked to come out with suggestions on changes and judicial reforms while Amirsham will be heading the Economic Planning Unit," he said.

Abdullah assured that his line-up of cabinet is clean based on the records of the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) and police.

However, a reporter asked him about the status of his deputy Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak who had received the strongest attacks by the opposition, especially during the election campaign.

"There has been no evidence whatsoever to prove that Najib was involved in any corruption practice. Even Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim faced a lot of allegations and accusations. But what is important is there is no evidence of anything. People can talk about boxes of evidence but (in actual fact) there is none. I have the latest information from the ACA and police with regard to the various candidates," he added.

Asked to comment on the possibility of Umno members calling for a vote of no-confidence against him in the coming annual general assembly, Abdullah said: "As far as I'm concerned, I'm here. I have been given a strong mandate, short of winning a two-thirds majority. I'm not one who will shirk my responsibility or turn away from the many who have supported and given me their votes. I also have the support of Umno and BN leadership."