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Najib shows he's in charge

The Prime Minister's dramatic Cabinet reshuffle will shore up his grip on the Government and in Umno.

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IT was a shocker — that is the most apt word to describe the Cabinet reshuffle.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak delivered a stunner when he axed Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin from his posts of Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister.

It was a major Cabinet reshuffle, far more drastic than anyone had expected. The velvet gloves have come off and the Prime Minister is tightening his hold on the Government as well as Umno.

Power in Umno goes hand-in-hand with government positions and Najib has learnt well from the great Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in wielding the powers of incumbency. The move was all the more dramatic coming so soon after the "Cheras speech", during which Muhyiddin had criticised the handling of the 1MDB issue.

The ripples were greatest in Umno because Muhyiddin is also the party's deputy president and the last time the No. 2 in the party was chosen was in 1998 when Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim lost his job.

As far as Najib was concerned, his deputy had crossed the line one

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time too many. Najib had told his Cabinet many times not to jump the gun or to pressure him over the 1MDB investigations. He had also told them that they were free to resign if they did not agree with his policies.

"I thought Muhyiddin was asking for trouble when he said all that stuff in Cheras. Why blast it all in the open again?" said Kapar Umno division chief Datuk Faizal Abdullah.

On hindsight, Muhyiddin's salvos at the Cheras Umno division meeting on Sunday night was the last straw for Najib. They were no longer on the same page and one of them had to go.

Najib met the Yang di-Pertuan Agong on Monday morning and informed Muhyiddin of the decision hours before the announcement.

The tough guy in Najib has finally

come out. He also chopped Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal, who was a long-time loyalist until he decided to join forces with Muhyiddin. He is said to have taken Shafie's betrayal to heart because they go back all the way to Najib's years as Umno Youth chief.

"He is showing that he is the one in charge, so don't mess with him," said Wan Hakim Wan Mokhtar, the assemblyman for Air Putih, Terengganu.

But the shock over Muhyiddin was somewhat off-set by the new Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who is very popular in Umno and has made a difference in crime and security since being appointed Home Minister.

It is a huge promotion for this charismatic and unassuming man, whose parents were religious teachers in Bagan Datoh, Perak. His loyalty to Najib was proven in the way he stood by the No. 1 in these troubled times. The fact that he is keeping his Home Minister portfolio will make him a powerful No. 2.

Not everyone will be happy with the reshuffle. Some will see the new Cabinet as a team of "yes-men" who

will be afraid to question the boss. Others say it is long-overdue, that Najib has been too nice and even too soft with his team. He allowed some of them to run circles around him and they are glad he is finally cracking the whip.

Will the chopping of Muhyiddin and Shafie lead to an all-out war within Umno? They can still give him a headache, but they would lose their clout without Cabinet posts.

Many are expecting them to now openly align with Tun Dr Mahathir to step up the pressure on the 1MDB issue. There is also no telling how this will play out at the Umno divisional AGMs, which started last weekend and will continue through August.

But, said an Umno insider, Najib may have pre-empted them. New ministers Datuk Seri Azalina Othman Said (Prime Minister's Department) and Datuk Salleh Said Keruak (Communications and Multimedia) are expected to play "fighting cock" roles in Johor and Sabah respectively.

Datuk Seri Mahdzir Khalid, the former Kedah menteri besar, is also expected to checkmate Dr

Mahathir's son Datuk Seri Mukhriz in Kedah.

The new deputy ministers include many new faces who will be groomed for the future. Among those who stand out are Datuk Johari Ghani (Finance), Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed (Home) and Senator Datuk Dr Asyraf Wajid Dusuki (Religious Affairs).

There is no denying that the reshuffle is primarily aimed at shoring up Najib's position especially in Umno. He is fighting for his survival and he is not only up against a very strong Opposition, he also has to contend with Dr Mahathir.

"He needs a team he can trust and that can support him through thick and thin," said Wan Hakim.

Last week, when Dr Ahmad Zahid sent out invitations to his Hari Raya open house on Aug 4, some reporters had joked that the Umno crowd would swarm the event because they see him as the next Deputy Prime Minister. It happened sooner than they thought and his Hari Raya do is going to be super-crowded.

Politicians come and go and Dr Ahmad Zahid's time has come.