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What PM gives, PM takes

PREROGATIVE: Like the captain of a football team, the prime minister decides who the team players are

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ONE evening many years ago, I was in a Bangkok hotel lounge with Datuk Hamzah Abu Samah, then a government minister, chatting about this and that when a hotel staff came over carrying a small board with Hamzah's name on it. This was when mobile phones were still in the realm of science fiction. He quickly excused himself and went over to the reception counter to take a telephone call. He returned shortly and looked somewhat agitated. I asked him if everything was all right. Then, he said something so profoundly moving that I have not forgotten in spite of the intervening decades. Taking a sip of drink, he tilted his head towards heaven above and said, or perhaps sighed would be a more appropriate word, "What Tuanku gives, Tuanku takes." Apparently, Tuanku Pahang had been unhappy about something Hamzah was supposed to have committed, and the palace chamberlain had been ordered to tell him that His Highness would strip him of his Pahang honours. I am pleased to say that the Tuanku relented.

I am reminded of this long forgotten moment in the life of an outstanding Malaysian leader by the recent cabinet reshuffle and the emotions it aroused that had some people in a real tizzy. It is amazing how a vocal few who are completely ignorant or chose to be blind about the workings of the Westminster model of government on which ours is closely based have threatened to protest against the prime minister's decisions by taking to the streets. Those bent on organising "peaceful" street demonstrations are obviously pursuing their own hidden, or perhaps, as events unfold not so hidden any more. They are bent on destabilising and disrupting the country and its institutions to the detriment of racial harmony, national peace and security.

The prime minister may be the "first among equals", but he is head of government and the cabinet is his team, chosen to assist him govern the country. It is entirely his prerogative whomsoever he wants on his team, with the exception of convicted criminals, those of unsound mind, bankrupts and their ilk. We may not always agree with the choice he makes; we always think we know better, forgetting that he has to live with them and if they turn out to be unfit to continue to play a useful role or for any other reason, then like a good captain, to use a soccer analogy, he has drop them especially if they are not good team players. The cabinet over which Datuk Seri Najib Razak presides is not unlike a soccer team. There is no place for a prima donna. If a minister for moral, ethical or other reasons feels so strongly about an issue which his principle will not allow him to support, then the honourable thing to do is to offer to resign. Unfortunately, such tra-

dition has not developed in our version of the British system that we have adopted in form but not substance. Will we ever see anyone resign over a matter of principle both in government or industry?

In carrying out his duties to the country, the most complex and difficult country anywhere to govern, he must be allowed, without the chattering masses snapping at his heels incessantly, to do what he has been elected to do. Appointments to the cabinet are his and his alone to make. The position of the deputy prime minister is not one enshrined in our country's constitution. It is traditional practice to appoint the Umno deputy president as deputy prime minister. There is nothing to stop Najib, if he feels so inclined, to appoint any number of deputy prime ministers to assist him deal with the country's mounting problems on many fronts. I see a good reason now to appoint one each from Sabah, Sarawak, the MCA and MIC as "second deputy + prime minister". They will help ease his heavy responsibilities and at the same time, make for a greater sense of unity and inclusiveness. Non-Malay Malaysians must be given a bigger constructive role in the affairs of this country. History has brought us together and this land belongs to, as Tunku Abdul Rahman used to say, all those "who love and owe their undivided loyalty to this, the land of their birth". We naturally have to be careful of those who while professing undying love for this country are only too willing at the same time to subvert the interests of loyal, law-abiding Malaysians by becoming tools of foreign agents. These are the true enemies of state. The Malaysia Development Bhd affair is a blessing in disguise: it has exposed subversive elements, conspirators, many seeking refuge and taking advantage of the protection guaranteed by the government in cyberspace.

Let me conclude by saying that while we are entitled to scream and shout about the way we perceive the prime minister is running the show, we must understand the role and limits of the prime minister's authority. In selecting and dismissing members of the government that he leads, he and he alone decides. As Datuk, later Tan Sri Hamzah Abu Samah said in that Bangkok hotel lounge all those long years ago, "What Tuanku gives, Tuanku takes". Put in the context of the recent dropping of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and lesser Umno luminaries, what the prime minister gives, the prime minister takes. It is his prerogative, after all.

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