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New cabinet solidifies PM's position

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STATUS: Najib has cemented position as BN's 'numero uno' and shown he is firmly in charge



DATUK Seri Najib Razak's successful restructuring of the cabinet is the cherry on the cake for the prime minister after scoring a string of major breakthroughs in recent months.

The reshuffle, which was preceded by several events that ultimately turned out in Barisan Nasional's favour, has solidified his position and stature as the coalition's *numero uno*.

With a solid team squarely behind him, Najib has effectively placed himself at a crucial vantage point from where he can draw up a battle plan and lead BN's charge towards the next general election.

Although some predicted the reshuffle would be announced after Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Najib set a precedent by unveiling his new line-up in the middle of Ramadan.

Fresh from BN's resounding victories in the Sarawak election last month and the recent Sungai Besar and Kuala Kangsar by-elections, it was only logical for Najib to keep the momentum going by bolstering the top government leadership.

BN's back-to-back electoral victories were the impetus Najib and his administration needed to gain a competitive edge over their detractors, particularly critics within Umno and opposition leaders.

"The cabinet rejig has fortified Najib's position as prime minister and Umno president.

"Najib is sending a strong message to his adversaries that he is firmly in charge despite previous setbacks," said Professor Dr Zaid Ahmad from Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Najib's toughest critic, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, had hurled various accusations against him during the Sungai Besar by-election but his punches failed to land the killing blow.

Political pundits argued that Dr Mahathir's influence over the people had started to wane over time, and that the latter's association with the deeply divided opposition was more of a bane than a boon.

"The results of the Sarawak election and twin by-elections show

that the opposition is unable to unite against BN. Meanwhile, Dr Mahathir has no influence among rural Malay voters," said University of Tasmania's Asia Institute director Professor Dr James Chin.

And with critics like Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir expunged from Umno, Najib can now concentrate on building up BN's strength without fear of being impeded.

"Now that his opponents are no longer in Umno, Najib must take the opportunity to put in place a strong machinery," said Chin, adding that the prime minister stood a good chance of winning a bigger mandate in the next election.

Universiti Sains Malaysia's Professor Dr Sivamurugan Pandian, however, pointed out that Najib still faced the ongoing task of overcoming the trust gap created by his backbiters.

"Najib's image outside BN is still shaky due to the accusations levelled against him.

"But the sacking of Muhyiddin and Mukhriz has allowed him to consolidate his position.

"Meanwhile, BN's recent electoral victories have ensured that morale within the coalition is boosted and Najib's political legitimacy is not in any doubt."

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi has also been identified as one of the big winners this year, with a groundswell of support swiftly building up for him in Umno and BN.

"He took charge of the recent elections and has proven himself to be a capable leader.

"He is very popular in Umno and his position will continue to strengthen," said Professor Dr Azizuddin Mohd Sani from Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Zahid, who worked as Najib's political secretary from 1986 to 1995, is a long-time ally of the prime minister.

"His loyalty to Najib is unquestionable and Zahid's main role now is to help BN win back the support, trust and confidence of the people.

"His contribution in Sarawak and both by-elections was significant as well," said Sivamurugan.