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Analysis
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Najib redraws his inner circle

The appointment of Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein as Special Functions Minister is a step up his career path but, as some have stressed, it does not make him 'DPM 2'. *The Star - 13/4/2017*

A PROMOTION of this kind happens once in a blue moon and however hard Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein tried to hold on to his emotions, everyone could see that he was on cloud nine after being appointed Special Functions Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Whichever way one looks at it, the appointment is a step up, an additional portfolio to his Defence Minister post.

The last person to hold a similar post was Tun Daim Zainuddin and the portfolio lent him a prestige that no other minister had.

But times have changed and it is up to Hishammuddin to shape and draw out his portfolio in the months to come.

Political insiders suggest it will probably involve quite a bit of international responsibilities and projects, given what some have described as his "diplomatic flair"

on issues of a global nature.

They see Hishammuddin playing a more "heavy duty" role on the international front where doors naturally swing open given his family name, his polished English and good looks and, of course, the fact that he is the cousin of the Prime Minister.

His central role in the counter-terrorism centre initiative by Saudi Arabia and Malaysia has also been cited as part of his new portfolio.

Saudi Arabia is very important to Malaysia, both in terms of investments, trade and the Mecca connection.

Hishammuddin, unknown to many people, has played a vital role in building those ties.

He has cultivated a personal friendship with Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Salman

Al Saud, who is a sort of Khairy Jamaluddin figure.

The Saudi prince is also Defence Minister and an influential figure in the Saudi government and their personal friendship has opened doors for Malaysia.

The appointment is also a hint that the general election will be this year rather than in 2018.

The focus of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and his deputy Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi will be on the domestic front in the coming months.

It is understood that Najib only has a couple of foreign trips lined up for the rest of the year. The No. 1 and No. 2 will be starting their nationwide pre-election blitz very soon.

Hishammuddin will be taking over foreign travels that the top two are unable to do so.

The Opposition parties wasted no time in spinning the appointment as a move to checkmate Dr Ahmad Zahid.

But a political insider said this is not about making Hishammuddin the "DPM 2".

"The power line-up is still Najib as No. 1 and Zahid as No. 2. But I guess the appointment means that Hisham is now No. 3 in the Umno hierarchy," said the insider.

Both Dr Ahmad Zahid and Hishammuddin are Umno vice-presidents but the former has assumed the duties of the deputy president following the sacking of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

That has left Hishammuddin as the only vice-president. But the appointment puts him in a firm position as the top vice-president.

"It is a clear signal that the PM wants the best senior leadership

team to face the challenges ahead, especially with the general election looming.

"Seniority is important in politics and this is a way to establish a clearer hierarchy within the national leadership," said KRA political risk analyst Amir Fareed Rahim.

Najib is sitting very strong in Umno especially after the Umno general assembly last December. The chain of command is clearly established after more than a year of intense power struggle.

On top of that, he has Dr Ahmad Zahid, his long-time friend and political comrade on his right and cousin Hishammuddin on the left.

Dr Ahmad Zahid is bound to feel a little nervous over Hishammuddin's upward move but his insurance is that Najib is too astute to put his cousin as the No. 2.

Two cousins at the top would not be well-accepted by Umno or Malaysians. It would be too much to swallow and it would open the party to all sorts of insinuations and gossip.

"There will be all kinds of conclusions drawn about what has happened but it very much means that the PM has redrawn his inner circle," said Amir.