

From DPM to PM in quick time

Comment by WONG CHUN WAI

DATUK Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob probably never imagined how much his life would change in only 46 days.

He was appointed the Deputy Prime Minister on July 7 but more than a month later, he became the shortest-serving Deputy Prime Minister in Malaysia's history when Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin's administration collapsed.

With Muhyiddin handing his resignation letter to the King on Aug 16, it had seemed that the mild-mannered Pahang politician would be a footnote in history.

But he is now Malaysia's ninth Prime Minister. The Yang di-Pertuan Agong, after a meeting with his fellow Rulers, has picked the 61-year-old lawyer to helm the country.

This came after 114 Members of Parliament endorsed him as Prime Minister. The MP for Bera from Pahang has set a record – being promoted twice to the country's highest political posts in over a month.

It looks like a feat that will be hard to match. Say what you want; Ismail Sabri takes the credit for putting together a deal that many thought would have been impossible.

Last Sunday at around 9.45pm, an Umno MP texted to say that negotiations between Umno and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia had

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reached a deadlock, adding that His Majesty would have to decide.

But 48 hours later, the mood changed with the Umno leadership finally deciding to endorse their vice-president, Ismail Sabri.

As the saying goes, the rest is history: 114 MPs from Perikatan Nasional, Barisan Nasional, Gabungan Parti Sarawak, Parti Bersatu Sabah and four independents gave their backing to Ismail Sabri.

The only exception was veteran Umno MP from Gua Musang, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

Ismail Sabri is taking over the role of Prime Minister in the most difficult time of our nation's history. Fighting the Covid-19 pandemic and rebuilding the economy is tough; he will continue to walk on thin ice.

He cannot afford a repeat of MPs pulling out as what happened when Umno withdrew support for Muhyiddin as Prime Minister.

The irony is after going through all this, the government is back with the same figure of 114 MPs. The difference is that the Prime Minister is now from Umno instead of Bersatu.

Ismail Sabri faces a strong and

formidable Opposition headed by PKR president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who has failed to become Prime Minister again.

But don't be quick to write off Anwar as he still has another chance in the general election. He could well have the public on his side by riding on the anti-establishment sentiments of the people.

As Ismail Sabri celebrates his appointment, his problems could well be starting. Even though he is Prime Minister, he still has to answer to his Umno bosses and meet the demands of Bersatu and other partners, including GPS in Sarawak.

As the incoming Prime Minister, his immediate task is to ensure that he completes the last lap of a full vaccination drive for the country and puts the economy back on track. If he can do this, he will begin his administration on the right footing.

He may inherit the bloated Cabinet from the previous administration due to the compromises and deals that were hammered out, and could have the same ministers who have been heavily criticised.

But if he is prepared to cut down on

the number of ministers and advisers, he would earn a lot of goodwill.

To his supporters, Ismail Sabri is affable and humble, which has endeared him to the rural folk, but critics say he is not urbane enough.

Obviously, he is well aware of the many controversial statements he made in the past which have painted him as an ultra-Malay leader, but he must understand that he is now the Prime Minister of all Malaysians.

A list of issues has gone viral to remind him of what he said previously. The days of politicians who use race and religion will no longer be looked upon favourably. Thanks to social media, images of their ill-fated remarks will continue to haunt them in cyberspace.

It didn't help Ismail Sabri when he defended his stand as it made him sound defensive, stubborn or worse; his justifications and denial merely deepened the negative optics.

But those who know Ismail Sabri can tell you that he is not the racist he has been made out to be. Perception, unfortunately, is everything.

When a *Nanyang Siang Pau* reporter, Eric Foo, was hospitalised,

Ismail Sabri immediately and discreetly visited him.

Ismail Sabri also visits a Malaysian restaurant run by businessman Tam Yun Tong each time he visits Tokyo, Japan. He will spend extra time chatting with the mostly Malaysians of Chinese ethnicity at the cafe.

In his constituency, a district in southwestern Pahang bordering Negri Sembilan, he is easily accessible.

But he will need more than these anecdotes to win trust. He will have to show that he is the leader every Malaysian can depend on to take them through these choppy waters, regardless of their race or religion.

The nation is at war and he has been chosen as the general to take on the pandemic. Now is the time to bring Malaysians together, including political opponents.

As an Umno veteran, he would know how Tunku Abdul Rahman, despite fighting for Malay rights, is regarded as the greatest Malaysian leader by all races until today.

Ismail Sabri is fighting against the clock as he has to prove his worth quickly to a mandate at the election.

Keep the Spirit of 57 alive and meaningful as we celebrate the 64th National Day. Over to you, Datuk Seri, and congratulations on your appointment as Prime Minister. We want you to succeed so that Malaysians will succeed too.

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