

# PM's 'Cabinet of compromise'

Analysis by JOCELINE TAN

FORMING his first Cabinet has been like walking on eggshells for Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob.

The Prime Minister has not been able to do as he liked because he is up there not on his own mandate, but on the conditional support of his political partners.

It was obvious that he had some trouble drawing up his Cabinet list.

There was so much back and forth on the Cabinet list because he had to refer to his partners and his own party boss, be it on the candidates, portfolios or the changes that had to be made along the way.

It was also no secret that the list went before the Palace a few times before it was finally unveiled.

The most significant last-minute change concerned the Deputy Prime Minister post.

For several days, word was that Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin had picked Datuk Seri Azmin Ali for the job.

The Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia president felt obligated to propose Azmin for the No 2 job because of their joint role in toppling Pakatan Harapan in 2020.

Those who sent Azmin birthday greetings on Wednesday had also wished him well on getting the post.

But some things are not meant to be and it is unclear whether the blockage to Azmin's appointment happened at the level of the political partners or at the palace gate.

Sources said there was a subse-

## Ismail Sabri had to cross some tricky political hurdles before he could finally unveil his line-up.

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quent attempt to compensate him with the finance portfolio but that, too, had failed to get through and that was how Ismail Sabri ended up with maintaining the senior ministers arrangement.

The only other PM who had as much trouble forming a Cabinet was Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad after the 2018 general election.

He had to deal with arguments and even people walking out of the discussion following the polls.

Ismail Sabri has cleared his first big hurdle although the opinion out there is that people are getting more of the same.

His priority is stability among his partners and he has given his Cabinet a 100-day ultimatum to perform or there could be changes.

But it is still an obese Cabinet filled with personalities, many of whom have shown limited talents or abilities.

The silver lining here is that this Cabinet has a shelf life of only about six to nine months depending on when the government can achieve herd immunity on the pandemic.

A general election remains the most acceptable way to determine what the people want.

Giving the Health portfolio to Khairy Jamaluddin won all-round approval because he has done such a competent job coordinating the

vaccination programme.

There is no doubt that the Rembau MP will be able to show that one does not need a medical degree to be Health Minister and that what is needed is brains.

His appointment as Health Minister will also give Malaysians a sense of confidence that we can emerge from this cursed pandemic.

"It's basically a Cabinet of compromise. The PM has to keep his partners happy and has made some cosmetic changes to show that there are some differences from the previous government," said lawyer and columnist Ivanpal S. Grewal.

Ismail Sabri rewarded a few of those who stuck by him and kept some who sided with Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

"It was smart of him to reach out to Pakatan Harapan, to show his detractors that he has options. He's certainly got the survivor instinct," said Ivanpal.

Ismail Sabri may also have a bit of the killer instinct when it comes to his two closest rivals in Umno.

Former foreign minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, seen as his closest rival, was sent back to the Defence Ministry. It was akin to Ismail Sabri telling his competitor: Checkmate!

Another rival, Umno deputy pre-

sident Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan, did not make it despite speculation that he was being considered for the Finance portfolio.

Ismail Sabri has also shown that he was not going to kowtow to whatever his president demands. He had run the Umno list for the Cabinet by Ahmad Zahid but he stood his ground about bringing his own allies on board.

Umno, however, failed to wrest back key portfolios like Finance as well as Home and Agriculture – which have remained with Bersatu – and that may cause ripples among the Umno hawks.

There will also be ripples within Bersatu members who feel that they have been short-changed. They gave up the PM post without getting an equivalent in return.

Only Gabungan Parti Sarawak or GPS, which focused on managing the state, did not give Ismail Sabri any trouble.

PAS lobbied successfully to secure the religious portfolio for its rising star Idris Ahmad, an ulama figure from Perak.

Two controversial PAS figures were dropped. One was former minister Datuk Dr Mohd Khairuddin Aman Razali – better known as Khairuddin at-Takiri – who was stopped at a roadblock a few months ago, allegedly with a female

companion that some claimed to be his third wife.

Che Abdullah Mat Nawi, who wedded a second wife overseas during the lockdown, was replaced by Dewan Ulama chief Nik Muhammad Zawawi Salleh as Deputy Agriculture and Food Industries Minister II.

Ismail Sabri had a turbulent start to his premiership. The optics from his visit to flood-ravaged Kedah was quite disastrous. He had good intentions going there but it came across as politicians making political capital out of people's hardship.

But, overall, he is sitting quite comfortably up there.

He has managed to work his way around two influential men in Umno – his president and Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

He does not have an ambitious DPM to worry about and he has the cooperation of Pakatan leaders.

Ismail Sabri has no oratory skills, he is not known for brilliant ideas and he may come across as rather bland.

But said Titiwangsa Umno chief Datuk Seri Johari Ghani, it would be a mistake to underestimate Ismail Sabri.

"Don't play-play with him. He got the DPM job without the party's okay, then he became PM after a lot of politicking and now he has his own Cabinet. But there will be no honeymoon," said Johari.

**The views expressed here are the writer's own.**