

ANWAR IN A DILEMMA OVER CABINET LINE-UP

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Efforts to map out strategy to weather economic storm in peril amid political pitfalls, say experts

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Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim speaking at a gathering with civil servants in Putrajaya on Tuesday. PIC BY MOHD FADLI HAMZAH

DESPITE high hopes that the federal cabinet line-up will be announced soon, a delay looks inevitable as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar has his hands full managing not just the people's expectations, but also demands from Pakatan Harapan's partners in the country's first unity government.

Experts cautioned that apart from the possible political pitfalls, a delay in forming the cabinet could slow down Malaysia's efforts to map out a strategy to weather the expected economic storm next year.

Sources told the *New Straits Times* that there has been a concerted push from Barisan Nasional (BN) to make Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahidi, who is BN chairman and Umno president, a deputy prime minister.

One source said this has presented a problem for Anwar due to Zahid's pending corruption case in court.

The source said giving Zahid a position would stoke discontent among PH supporters, who have been vocal in wanting the cabinet to be free of people facing corruption charges.

Another source said discussions were at a deadlock over key portfolios, including the sought after finance minister post.

It is understood that while the major contenders are touted to be BN's Titiwangsa member of parliament and former second finance minister Datuk Seri Johari Abdul Ghani and PKR deputy president Rafizi Ramli, another individual is said to be lobbying for the post, thus complicating matters.

"No one wants to be in Anwar's shoes right now. He is faced with the unenviable task of pleasing his party and his supporters, with the full knowledge that his unity government partners could abandon the fledgling government if their demands are not met," said

the source.

The NST has reached out to PH and BN leaders for comment on the issue to no avail.

It is understood that more than a week after the new prime minister took office, Istana Negara has yet to be presented with the cabinet line-up. This has put paid to the possibility of the cabinet being sworn in this week as the Yang di-Pertuan Agong will be abroad from Saturday.

Observers said apart from the potential political pitfalls, delaying cabinet appointments could have major implications.

Economists warned that further delays in forming the cabinet would slow down the government's efforts to formulate and implement effective strategies to tackle the expected economic downturn next year.

Associate Professor Dr Aimi Zuhazmi Abdul Rashid said the cabinet must be formed before the first sitting of the 15th Parliament on Dec 19.

He said a working cabinet would allow the government to formulate and table the 2023 Budget, an urgent agenda, adding that a stable government was critical to the economy of a developing country.

"Apart from Malaysians, the whole world is also waiting for the cabinet line-up. This includes the business community at home and abroad, especially those looking at investing in Malaysia.

"Multinational companies in the country are studying the government's next move as it will influence how industries plan their business development in view of the tough economic times in 2023. As such, they want to know what Malaysia has in store," said the economic analyst from Universiti Kuala Lumpur's Business School.

Political analyst Dr Azmi Hassan said while the delay was understandable, it will unavoidably give Anwar problems.

"Anwar not only needs to meet the needs of PH, comprising PKR, DAP and Parti Amanah Negara, he also needs to meet the demands of BN and the Borneo bloc.

"The needs of Borneo-based political parties, though very clear and direct, such as restoring the rights enshrined in the Malaysia Agreement 1963, are not easily fulfilled."

Singapore Institute of International Affairs senior fellow Dr Oh Ei Sun said it was normal for a prime minister to take up to a few weeks to announce a cabinet line-up, but in the meantime, the prime minister may discharge all the powers of ministries.

He believed that Anwar's pledge to have corruption-free leaders in the administration, though ideal, may need to be reviewed.

"Mainly, he has to make sure that the many component parties in his ruling coalition can accept their cabinet appointments, lest they take umbrage and withdraw their support, thus causing the downfall of his government.

"The desire to not have tainted cabinet members is an ideal. But the stark and cruel political reality is such that some component party leaders with court cases may bring their party out if they are not rewarded with cabinet appointments and maybe even some sort of lessening of their charges."

Sunway University economist Professor Yeah Kim Leng said while the delay in forming the cabinet may raise public and investors' anxiety, concerns would be tempered by the fact that it is a unity government that requires more time for negotiations.

"The public is likely to give more leeway to the new prime minister as long as the cabinet line-up reflects stability, competency and cohesion that can deliver the promises and expectations set by Anwar since his appointment."