

Anwar shows he is a 'listening PM'

Cabinet reshuffle proves he has been keeping tabs on ministers and deputy ministers.

THERE had been concern that the much-awaited Cabinet reshuffle would turn out to be another case of moving the furniture around.

But it turned out to be a major shake-up.

The changes suggest that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has been listening to voices from the ground and keeping tabs on the performances of his ministers and deputy ministers.

"It shows courage on the part of the PM to make changes in the wake of criticism that his government is not delivering and that his team is not responsive or engaging enough.

"He has also been quite brave to replace those who were not performing and drop those affected by scandals," said lawyer and political expert Ivanpal S. Grewal.

Or as a key aide to a former senior minister put it, Anwar is aware of what needs to be changed and has brought in new faces and promoted those he sees as performing.

It is also a bigger Cabinet with four new ministries and it is up to this team to perform and justify the expansion.

Even before the Prime Minister concluded his 11am press conference, the buzz was that the big winner was Sarawak, or rather Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS).

It is no secret that Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Fadillah Yusof



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of GPS had wanted out of his previous Plantations and Commodities portfolio. In keeping with Sarawak's reputation as an oil state, Fadillah is now the new "energy czar", in charge of the newly-minted Energy Transition and Public Utilities Ministry.

The fact that he has also been given responsibility over Sarawak and Sabah affairs is a measure of how important Sarawak's support is to Anwar and the growing clout of GPS in the Federal Government.

It was also quite clear that Datuk Amir Hamzah Azizan, formerly Employees Provident Fund CEO, would be made Finance Minister II when he was sworn in as a Senator early yesterday morning. He had been the subject of intense media speculation for days.

Many in the corporate world would have preferred Datuk Seri Johari Ghani as the second Finance Minister, who they feel understands the challenges they

are going through. But Johari is now the new Plantations and Commodities Minister.

Anwar probably feels more comfortable having a technocrat and non-politician as the second man although the talk is that Johari, an Umno vice-president whom Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi views as a threat, is the victim of a power play going on in Umno.

The same power play explains the rather comical rotation of the three ministers from Umno.

Umno deputy president Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan, or Tok Mat as he is known, was moved from the Defence Ministry to replace Datuk Seri Zambry Abdul Kadir as Foreign Minister.

Zambry replaced Datuk Seri Khaled Nordin as Higher Education Minister and Khaled moved to the Defence Ministry.

Do they think they are playing musical chairs? It is little wonder that people think Umno is a sinking ship.

"Zahid is trying to check the influence of Tok Mat and he is probably telling Johari to toe the line," said the aide to a former minister.

Defence is ranked among the top five in the federal list of portfolios and it is a blow to Mohamad.

The other winner in the reshuffle is DAP, which was awarded an extra ministerial portfolio in the form of Digital Minister Gobind

Singh Deo.

However, Gobind, who is DAP deputy chairman, came in at the expense of his brother Ramkarpal, who stepped down as Deputy Law Minister.

The reshuffle also saw rising DAP star Steven Sim promoted as Human Resources Minister and the party getting several new deputy ministers.

There had been rumblings among the Chinese base that DAP, the biggest partner in the government with 40 MPs, had only four ministers in the original Cabinet. Anwar has now corrected the imbalance.

The elevation of Taiping MP Wong Kah Woh to replace Lim Hui Ying as Deputy Education Minister was a welcome move among Chinese groups. Lim had failed to shine whereas Wong did well as chairman of Parliament's Public Accounts Committee.

However, she comes from the powerful Lim family and failure did not stop her from being appointed Deputy Finance Minister.

Anwar also acceded to public opinion about Dr Zaliha Mustafa, who was replaced by Amanah's Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad as Health Minister.

In another odd twist, the failed former health minister is now Federal Territories Minister.

However, the Prime Minister did not have the willpower to

change Education Minister Fadhlina Sidek despite public opinion about her.

It is an indication that Anwar values loyalty and friendship because Fadhlina's father was his staunch comrade through his years of ups and downs.

"Anwar is trying to walk the talk on good governance after the fallout on Zahid's DNAA. He wants to reclaim the mantra of good governance that helped propel him to power. Most of all, he wants to show us he is a listening PM," said Ivanpal.

The reshuffle is aimed at building a stronger team to take the country through the coming years. It also cemented the ties between the key partners so that the unity government will remain steady and unshaken.

But there is also a powerful subtext to the way Anwar has pulled it off. It is quite clear that he trusts no one else in Umno the way he trusts Ahmad Zahid and he needs the Umno president to keep the party in line.

As a result, Ahmad Zahid was allowed to reward Umno leaders loyal to him and check those whose loyalty is in doubt.

Anwar understands the power of incumbency. He is stamping his authority on his team and showing everyone that he is the boss.

The views expressed here are the writer's own.