

A Cabinet balancing act for Anwar

PM must carefully manage vacancies to maintain unity, say political analysts

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PETALING JAYA: With four vacancies soon in his Cabinet, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim now faces a delicate balancing act to ensure the work goes on without upsetting any of his unity government parties.

Although there is no rush to fill the spots - the Federal Constitution does not dictate a need to fill Cabinet vacancies except that of the Prime Minister - a prolonged vacancy can create public distrust, say political analysts.

However, they feel that any reshuffle is only likely to happen after the Sabah state election on Nov 29.

Two ministerial portfolios fell vacant when Economy Minister Datuk Seri Rafizi Ramli and Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability (NRES) Minister Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad resigned after the PKR party elections in May.

Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development Minister Datuk Ewon Benedick of Sabah's Upko resigned over the weekend, while International Trade and Industry (Miti) minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Abdul Aziz's senatorship ends in December and cannot be extended.

Ewon resigned over what he claimed was the Attorney General's Chambers' "disregard" for Sabah's constitutional right to 40% of federal revenue derived from the state.

For now, Finance Minister II Datuk Seri Amir Hamzah Azizan has been acting for Rafizi and Plantation and Commodities Minister Datuk Seri Johari Ghani has been the acting NRES minister.

Political analyst Prof Wong Chin Huat of Sunway University said a Cabinet reshuffle will only happen in December as Anwar needs to look at what happens in Sabah.

"Technically, all major contes-

tants in the Sabah election are members of the Madani government.

"The Sabah representation in the Cabinet will have to reflect the aspiration of the Sabah electorate.

"The portfolios of Economy and NRES are most likely to be filled from PKR, unless there is a swap of posts with other parties," said Wong.

He believes the Prime Minister's daughter Nurul Izzah - who beat Rafizi to the No. 2 job in PKR - is a likely contender for the Economy Ministry.

Wong also pointed to talk of former minister Khairy Jamaluddin rejoining Umno and being brought into the Madani Cabinet.

"If Khairy rejoins Umno, then it is up to the party to decide where to nominate him," he said.

Wong also believes Tengku Zafrul could be appointed as a Miti ministerial envoy so he could remain in public visibility until the next elections.

Universiti Sains Malaysia's political science expert Prof Dr Sivamurugan Pandian said Anwar has to keep several coalition partners satisfied and also manage perceptions.

"It's quite unusual to have several ministries led by acting ministers for an extended period. It shows how the political balancing is right now.

"Tengku Zafrul was in Umno when he was appointed to Miti, but he then joined PKR. So, does Umno get Miti again?"

"Usually yes, because in a coalition government, each party's ministerial post reflects its share in the Cabinet. If Anwar gives it to another party, it could upset Umno.

"He's trying to manage many coalition partners without upsetting the balance.

"He has many capable people but the Madani government is short of politically safe choices.

"Many capable MPs are already holding posts, and every new app-

ointment risks upsetting one faction or another.

"So, it's more about political space than talent," said Sivamurugan.

Universiti Utara Malaysia's Research Institute for Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore director Dr Md Shukri Shuib said the Cabinet is like a coalition within a coalition, rooted in multi-party politics.

"When such a confederative Cabinet exists, its effectiveness must be ensured, because each ministry has its own agencies and government-linked companies, many of which may have political appointees.

"It is important that ministerial appointments be made and a Cabinet reshuffle done now.

"If the Cabinet position remains vacant for too long, the public and civil servants dealing with the ministry may feel the government is not serious or stable.

"Confidence could continue to decline," said Shukri.