

Najib's bloated cabinet for political dividends, not reforms, say analysts

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By Eileen Ng

The expanded cabinet resulting from Datuk Seri Najib Razak's minor shake-up on Wednesday has more to do with political largesse than the need to drive reforms, said political analysts, who maintain that this will lead to more inefficiency in the government.

Political analysts said this was evident when Najib accommodated Chinese leaders from the two major Barisan Nasional component parties, MCA and Gerakan, into the cabinet but did not drop any underperformers or switch portfolios.

The analysts expressed concern that Najib's team, which at 35 is even bigger than his predecessor Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's 32-member cabinet, will further slow down reforms that are needed to drive the country forward.

"It was not a reshuffle, but an expansion concerned more with allocation of political dividends than reforms. There is not a single new face," observed political analyst Dr Oh Ei Sun from Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

Najib had appointed Gerakan president Datuk Mah Siew Keong as minister in the prime minister's department, as promised during the campaign for the May 31 Teluk Intan by-election.

He also gave his BN senior Chinese partner, MCA, two ministerial and three deputy minister's posts.

MCA president Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai is now Transport Minister, while his deputy Datuk Wee Ka Siong was made minister in the prime minister's department.

The party's three vice-presidents – Datuk Lee Chee Leong, Datuk Chua Tee Yong and Datin Paduka Chew Mei Fun – were appointed deputy ministers to the International Trade and Industry; Finance; and Women, Family and Community Development ministries respectively.

Analyst Tricia Yeoh, in describing the bigger cabinet as "uninteresting", said it was likely to be more inefficient.

"The latest cabinet change is perceived as a way for the prime minister to accommodate the various demands and interests of the numerous parties in the BN coalition."

Najib, she added, could have gone ahead with his reforms if he was fully committed to it, without waiting for a bigger line-up.

"I don't think it changes anything or adds any zest to Najib's capability for reforms. If he was able to do it, he would have done it," said the Institute of Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas) chief operating officer.

She is also sceptical that having MCA back in the government's fold would translate to more support from the Chinese community, which has abandoned the ruling government pact since the 2008 general election.

"I suppose the assumption is that having MCA in there, the Chinese will be better served but I'd question whether this will be the case as prior to last year's national polls, MCA had always been in the cabinet," she said, doubting that Chinese support would change as a result of MCA's return to Najib's team.

With the addition of Mah and Wee, the Prime Minister's Department now boasts 10 ministers, leading observers to question their roles and the need for such a large number of ministers in one department.

"This is crazy, the Prime Minister's Department now accounts for one-third of the cabinet. It looks as if it is running almost everything under the sun," said Professor James Chin from Monash University Malaysia.

"Malaysia must be now the most over-governed country in Southeast Asia," he said.

Chin pointed out that despite expectations from the people that the premier would overhaul his team by dropping underperformers, he stuck with them as he was afraid to upset the status quo.

"There won't be any reforms, reforms are actually dead with this expansion. For the cabinet to be more efficient, he has to decrease it," Chin said in a harsh assessment of Najib's bloated team.

He also said Najib was "very generous" in his allocation to MCA despite its poor showing in two consecutive general elections.

The party held four ministerial and seven deputy minister posts previously but opted to stay out of the cabinet as it won only seven federal and 11 state seats in last year's general election, down from the 15 federal and 32 state seats it gained in election 2008.

"This is not going to bring the Chinese back to BN," he said.

However, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak political analyst Dr Arnold Puyok thinks Najib had no choice but to get everyone on board.

"He needs to ensure that BN party leaders are adequately represented. It remains to be seen whether this will help drive his reform agenda," he said.

He also believes Najib has plans to retire some underperforming members of his cabinet but has to handle it carefully to avoid dividing his government further.

"He cannot afford to see BN in tatters now," he added. – June 27, 2014.

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