



In Suspense No More

The recent Cabinet reshuffle, putting paid to speculation, shows that the present administration is sticking to experience and familiarity.

AFTER keeping the country in suspense for more than a year – while waiting for *ilham* (inspiration) as he often told the Press – Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, on Feb 14, reshuffled his 32-member strong Cabinet.

It was described by the Umno-controlled *New Straits Times (NST)* newspaper, in a page-one editorial penned by its Group Editor Brendan Pereira, as ‘only a minor Cabinet reshuffle’.

In what appeared to be a move that neither rocked the boat nor forced him to leave familiar territory, Abdullah dropped four middle-ranking Ministers, reinstated two and appointed two new ones.

The casualties were Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Dr Shafie Mohd Salleh, Information Minister Datuk Seri Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, Tourism Minister Datuk Dr Leo Michael Toyah and Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Adenan Satem. Kadir and Adenan pre-empted Abdullah’s decision by submitting their resignation letters a day earlier.

He brought back the Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad-era Agriculture Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Effendi Norwawi and Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department Tengku Datuk Adnan Tengku Mansor. Sarawakian Effendi was made Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department while Tengku Adnan took over Tourism.

Promoted were former journalist Datuk Zainuddin Maidin as Information Minister and Datuk Zulhasnan Rafique as Federal Territories Minister.

One significant development was the transfer of Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department Datuk Mustapa Mohamed to the Higher Education Ministry.

It remains to be seen if the Prime Minister has sufficiently addressed the key question of economic and financial management, which will be fundamental to the successful implementation of the 9th Malaysia Plan.

Playing it smart

ALL key Ministers not only remain but also get to keep their portfolios. The most prominent is International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz.

Despite being embroiled in a controversy surrounding the issuance of approved permits (APs) for the importation of cars last year, which pitted her against her former boss and mentor Dr Mahathir, she remains a key member.

In her long Cabinet career, Rafidah has survived many controversies and allegations. Admittedly, she is

intelligent, hardworking and capable. She is the longest-serving Umno Minister, surpassing even the Prime Minister. She has had an uninterrupted Cabinet career since 1980.

Given the way she handled Dr Mahathir’s broadside, I cannot help but see her as Abdullah’s front-line defence should the former Prime Minister decide to continue to confront the Government on trade issues.

Rafidah has proven her worth by warding off Dr Mahathir’s

Abdullah is a political survivor and he knows having Rafidah on his side is a plus point. She not only enjoys strong support of the powerful Wanita Umno, of which she is the leader, but also the respect of the business community. It is safer for Abdullah to have her in the Cabinet than outside.

attack against her on the AP issue, which according to the former Prime Minister, is hurting the national car projects

Even if that isn't Abdullah's principal consideration, keeping Rafidah has to be seen as a shrewd move. Dr Mahathir, on his part, is likely to continue to raise trade issues in his capacity as adviser to Proton and Petronas.

Abdullah, on his part, has reconfirmed his commitment to keep the National Car Project, Proton, in Malaysian hands. This should be a major challenge to Rafidah to ensure that existing and future free trade agreements – like the one entered into with Japan in December – will not jeopardise national interest.

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It is safer for Abdullah to have her in the Cabinet than outside. Outside, she could use her vast influence in the women's wing to undermine whoever she sees as her enemies.

Effendi, on the other hand, is a charmer. His Cabinet record may not rate as brilliant but he is a key element in the politics of his near autonomous state, Sarawak, especially in the ruling Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB).

His return to the Cabinet after a two-year hiatus would have to be with the consent of the party's supremo and Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud. Abdullah visited him in Kuching just days before reinstating Effendi and releasing Adenan.

Effendi's return to the Cabinet could either signal his 'rehabilitation' or could be a ploy to keep him away from Sarawak politics.

This is not implausible, given the fact that the state election is approaching and Abdul Taib is not in the best of health. Should he decide to retire, a succession battle will most certainly ensue, unless a successor is anointed beforehand.

Abdul Taib, on his part, would certainly not want to appoint a successor who could pose a threat to his legacy and to the many corporate empires he has helped to inspire.

Effendi, Adenan and Datuk Seri Abang Johari Tun Abang Openg, the State Minister for Housing, have for years been key contenders for the coveted post.

Sideshow

AN interesting sideshow to the reshuffle was provided by the high-profile former Group Editor-in-Chief of The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Bhd (NSTP) Datuk Kalimullah Hassan, when he took a swipe at the new Information Minister.

Kalimullah, who continues to wield extensive power in the newspaper group in his new capacity as deputy chairman, accused Zainuddin of seeking the sacking of the top editors of the NSTP group in a closed-door Umno Information Bureau meeting days earlier.

In making the allegation, Kalimullah, who is also chairman of the private banking group ECM Libra Bhd and timber-based Ekowood Bhd, revealed just how closely linked he is to the Umno organ.

Whether it was judicious or not for him to do so is for Umno to decide. But Kalimullah was certainly not acting based on hearsay. He is listed on the Umno website as a member of the committee.

So were his Group Editor-in-Chief Datuk Hishamuddin Aun and five other editors and executives of Umno-linked media companies and government-owned news organisations.

So, we can say that Zainuddin and Kalimullah, both of whom are close friends and confidants of the Prime Minister, have the power and means to slug it out.

They are well matched. Zainuddin may not choose to use RTM to fight his personal battles, but some newspapers are almost certain to report his statements. Kalimullah, on the other hand, has the NSTP newspapers at his disposal to lambaste Zainuddin and all other 'bad people'.

Additionally, Kalimullah can count on his key editors, who are his appointees and his compatriots from his foreign correspondent days, to keep his detractors at bay and in check.

With the editors who did not see eye-to-eye with him having either left the NSTP group or opting for the company's latest round of voluntary separation scheme (VSS), Kalimullah's hold on the newspaper group is unquestionable.

So much for press freedom

IT is ironic that Kalimullah should cite press freedom as one of the cornerstones of Abdullah's administration while at the same time continuing to ban this magazine and other publications belonging to Berita Publishing Sdn Bhd (BPSB) from being advertised in the group's newspapers.

The ban, which also covers BPSB's corporate advertisements, has been in effect since June 2005. It was imposed soon after this scribe had written in this column commenting on an article in the *NST* by Kalimullah in which he revealed, among other things, that Abdullah had phoned him to seek page-one treatment for his speech.

In response to our most recent enquiry, the NSTP Senior Manager, Customer Support, Brenda Marshall, in an e-mail dated Feb 7, said: 'Thank you for your

enquiry. Regret we have not as yet changed our position on this.'

And four days after invoking Abdullah's name to support his tirade against Zainuddin, the *NST* published a cartoon, which to some readers amounted to mocking Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), in its *Life & Times* section. After days of posturing and blaming others for attracting attention to the cartoon, the *NST*, on Feb 24, apologised unreservedly, but continued to damn its critics. In particular, Zainuddin, blogger Jeff Ooi and this scribe.

My sin was that I had sent an SMS to its Group Editor-in-Chief Datuk Hishamuddin Aun to alert him on the cartoon. For that, I was accused of carrying out a vendetta (*NST*, Feb 22). Press freedom rings hollow if the Press freely criticises others but is unwilling to be criticised. The Prime Minister has since decided that no action will be taken against the *NST* after its open apology.

I hope Kalimullah's tirade and Zainuddin's alleged demand for the sacking of NSTP editors have nothing to do with *perasaan cemburu* (jealousy).

They can both serve the Prime Minister and remain his friends. The Malaysian media and political scenes are big enough for the both of them.

Kalimullah has taken pains to compare Zainuddin's age with that of Works Minister Datuk Seri S Samy Vellu and Energy, Water and Telecommunications Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik. I don't think age matters much. What matters is the grey matter, the experience and the capacity to work hard.

Incidentally, Vision 2020 was not launched in 1990 as Kalimullah had stated in his commentary but in 1991 based on Dr Mahathir's paper entitled *The Way Forward* presented at the plenary session of the Malaysian Business Council.

SEE YOU IN COURT

AT a time when we are being told that we are freer and the Government is more tolerant of criticism, something quite the opposite is happening and it is manifesting itself in the form of civil suits.

An increasing number of people – usually politicians – are taking their critics to court or are threatening to do so.

After hesitating for some months, the former Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, on Jan 27 filed a defamation suit against Dr Mahathir for allegedly

portraying him as a homosexual.

Having made a threat to sue his former boss and mentor, the Parti Keadilan Rakyat advisor had little choice but to proceed, lest he is prepared to be accused of calling a bluff.

Anwar is aware of the high risk that he is taking. Should the court decide to hear his case soon, he will have to expect to see Dr Mahathir in court. The latter has said that now that he is no longer the Prime Minister, he would be willing to testify if called upon.

But Anwar could be hoping for the court not to take up the case until after the next general election, which could be as early as next year or in 2008, or if Dr Mahathir, in the meantime, becomes incapacitated.

Another equally high-profile politician who is threatening legal action is the Umno Youth deputy chief and son-in-law of the Prime Minister, Khairy Jamaluddin.

The businessman-politician is threatening to take Deputy Pas President Husam Musa to court for questioning his RM9.3 million purchase of 3% of ECM Libra shares. Husam had asked where the 30-year-old got the money for the purchase.

This was on top of an *ex-parte* injunction against him and Edisi Prima Sdn Bhd, the publisher of the Pas online newspaper *Harakahdaily.net*, obtained by ECM Libra on Feb 8.

It is an affront to democracy when politicians take their critics

to court for making allegations against them in the political arena. In effect, they are surrendering their power to the court.

Over in Thailand, the Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, is also threatening to sue his accusers over the allegations of insider trading and other improprieties in connection with the RM7.2 billion tax-free sale of a telecommunications company his family owned to Singapore's Temasek Holdings.

Unlike you and I, politicians are answerable directly to the people. They are where they are because the people have put them there. So they must think of what their constituents feel before they take their complaints to court.

Or are they going to court to stop the public from discussing their alleged wrongdoings? **mb**

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