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Abdullah answers critics with bold Cabinet shake-up

By Ooi Kee Beng

For The Straits Times Dated March 21, 2008

IF MALAYSIAN Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi had announced a Cabinet on March 18 with as few changes as he had made when he reshuffled his Cabinet two years ago, the allegations of weak leadership that had hurt his ruling coalition so badly 10 days earlier would have been magnified. The calls for him to resign would have risen to a crescendo.

Instead, he showed courage in responding to the demands placed on him after his ruling coalition lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority, as well as control over four additional states besides Kelantan.

He threw out former Minister of International Trade and Industry Rafidah Aziz and former Tourism Minister Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, among others, and filled his Cabinet with many new faces. The New Straits Times, generally considered the English-language voice of the dominant United Malays National Organisation (Umno), proclaimed the new Cabinet to be the one he should have formed four years earlier, when he succeeded Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

But the truth of the matter is that the new Cabinet is very much a response to challenges that did not exist before. Four years ago, Datuk Seri Abdullah had the luxury of being able to play it safe after winning a handsome mandate.

Two years ago, when he reshuffled his Cabinet, he had settled into his position. In the face of increasing attacks from Tun Dr Mahathir, he had to consolidate his power, and so made few changes to his government.

Now, his party and his coalition have suffered greatly at the hands of voters. The Malaysian political scenario has changed beyond recognition. Many of the old rules no longer apply.

He no longer had to include the leaders of all of Barisan Nasional's (BN) component parties, for they had been defeated or weakened by the elections. The need to include as many parts of the country as possible is no longer there, since five states in the north, and 10 out of 11 parliamentary seats in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur are now controlled by the opposition.

In trying to rebuild the party and coalition after the elections, Datuk Seri Abdullah has precipitated calls for his resignation from within Umno. But paradoxically, the dramatic election results did free his hands to a considerable extent. Faced with a situation in which consensus was no longer possible, he stood his ground, and managed to do what many had wanted him to do for a long time.

The new Cabinet is necessary not only because he has to rebuild his government and respond to voter sentiments. It also serves to fortify his defences against attacks from within the party in the months to come. There is fear that heavy infighting within Umno will destabilise the country.

For Malaysians who may now feel that they might have voted for more change than they were comfortable with, Datuk Seri Abdullah's surprisingly radical choice of new ministers would be welcome. It promises a change in governance at the same time as it reveals a prime minister who is willing to fight back with the help of capable people. Some of these individuals had been sidelined or had sidelined themselves over the past few years.

By and large, the new Cabinet seems to show that Datuk Seri Abdullah and his advisers are becoming aware of the problems facing the government. He needed to send out a signal that change was not impossible under him. He did this by choosing appropriate ministers for specific areas of concern, and by bringing in as many as 16 new ministers. The fact that he has opted for people known to be loyal to him lessens the chances of disunity at the top.

By placing Johor Baru's hard-working Datuk Shahrir Samad in the difficult portfolio of domestic trade and consumer affairs at a time of rising inflation, Datuk Seri Abdullah is trying to pre-empt the social unrest that higher prices will cause.

In a move that will appease critics of the judiciary, the Prime Minister placed lawyer Zaid Ibrahim in charge of judicial affairs. The state of the judiciary, its reputation having suffered greatly over the last 20 years, is a key concern among Malaysians.

In moving former Foreign Affairs Minister Syed Hamid Albar to Home Affairs and Internal Security, Datuk Seri Abdullah is hoping to stem the damage that police corruption has inflicted on his administration.

One appointment that has caused consternation is the choice of Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib as Minister for Rural Development. He has been tainted by allegations of corruption. The appointment seems to have been motivated by his grassroots credentials in Selangor, a state the opposition won.

Malaysia post-March 8 consists of two halves: one, a northern arc of opposition states covering the most urbanised and industrialised parts of the country; and the other a

southern arc and East Malaysia in BN hands. This is mirrored in the new Cabinet's make-up: Johor politicians are now prominent, Sabah has three ministers and four deputy ministers, while Sarawak boasts two ministers and eight deputies.

The Cabinet line-up is as much Datuk Seri Abdullah's tactical reply to calls for his resignation as it is his response to the unhappiness of voters. Although he could have gone further in cleaning house, the new Cabinet does reflect his realisation that he lost a lot of support because he did not do much.

Whether what he is now doing is too little, too late remains to be seen.

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