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New cabinet will lead BN into GE14

STRATEGIC:

Appointments will strengthen coalition ahead of polls, say analysts



THE unveiling of the new cabinet line-up marks an important first step by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak in charting Barisan Nasional's course towards the 14th General Election.

While many have regarded the reshuffle to be a routine "fill-in-the-blanks" exercise, Najib's highly anticipated announcement yesterday revealed several major strategic appointments.

The appointments, said analysts, would strengthen Umno and its BN partners ahead of what could well be a hotly contested general election.

The biggest surprise, they said, was the appointment of Selangor BN chairman Tan Sri Noh Omar as urban wellbeing, housing and local government minister.

"Noh's unexpected return to the cabinet will greatly bolster his position in BN.

"This will definitely aid his attempt to recapture Selangor from the opposition," said political pundit Khoo Kay Peng yesterday.

Professor Dr Azizuddin Mohd Sani, from Universiti Utara Malaysia, said: "Noh's appointment comes on the heels of BN's big win in the Sungai Besar parliamentary by-

election.

"It is a known fact that Noh had made significant contributions to BN's win there.

"I foresee that Noh will have free rein over the design and execution of BN's battle plan in Selangor."

Khoo said the appointment of Gerakan president Datuk Seri Mah Siew Keong as plantation industries and commodities minister was a big win for the multiracial party.

"Mah is now in charge of a ministry that is traditionally held by a Gerakan leader. It's a big morale booster for the party," he said, adding that Mah's appointment was a recognition of Gerakan's important role in BN.

The late former Gerakan president Tun Dr Lim Keng Yaik had held the same portfolio from 1986 to 2004, during which he made Malaysia one of the largest palm oil producing countries in the world.

Universiti Sains Malaysia's Professor Dr Sivamurugan Pandian said although it was a minor cabinet restructuring exercise, Najib had strengthened the government leadership by appointing both new faces and experienced leaders.

"Overall, it is a well-balanced cabinet, but there is one less woman minister and one less minister from Sarawak.

"What is interesting, however, is that a Sabahan minister (Datuk Abdul Rahman Dahlan) has been given the task of heading the Economic Planning Unit, which is a very heavy

responsibility.

"Another Sabahan leader, Datuk Datu Nasrun Datu Mansur, has also been appointed as a deputy minister. It is a significant gain for Sabah."

University of Tasmania's Asia Institute director Professor Dr James Chin said Najib's decision not to axe any minister from the cabinet meant that the prime minister was confident in his team's strength.

"I am surprised nobody was dropped (from cabinet).

"It means he has a solid cabinet that supports him 100 per cent.

"However, the appointment of only one Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) leader was unexpected. Many had predicted that PBB vice-president and Deputy Rural and Regional Development Minister Datuk Alexander Nanta Linggi would be appointed as a full minister."

Najib's cabinet was slightly trimmed. There are now nine ministers and three deputy ministers in the Prime Minister's Department, compared with 11 ministers and two deputy ministers previously.

The latest cabinet shake-up is the third reshuffle since the 13th General Election in 2013 and would possibly be the last before the next polls.

It is highly likely that Najib has assembled the final line-up that will lead the coalition into the next general election.

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