A group of Wanita Umno leaders huddled at Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil’s Hari Raya Aidilfitri open house was at a loss over the surprise announcement made in Putrajaya just after lunch.

Some shed tears, but they soon overcame their emotion, vowing to respect the decision of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak on the choice of his new No 2.

Shahrizat, who later welcomed Najib and his family to her house, spoke on how the party should move on, not look back.

“In politics, we must always expect the unexpected,” she said.

Malaysians are still digesting the news that Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin has been dropped as deputy prime minister, apparently after his comments, mostly made privately, on 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB).

But the straw that broke the camel’s back was when he used the Cheras Umno divisional meeting on Sunday night to criticise Najib and the government over the handling of the 1MDB issue, a move that some equated to a declaration of war.

To some, his outburst, despite being the No 2 in the government and a member of the cabinet that should share collective responsibility, could amount to insubordination.

Najib’s bold decision to drop his deputy from the cabinet, together with five ministers and deputy ministers, may be controversial but should not, analysts say, be viewed as autocratic nor one that casts Muhyiddin as the villain.

Najib had himself referred to the fact that it was a difficult decision to make, as Muhyiddin’s contributions to the country had been immense.

The opposition has made a half-baked attempt to compare Muhyiddin’s political trajectory to the fall of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, but there are no parallels — Anwar was sacked and his removal was not through a cabinet reshuffle, where it was common to witness changes in line-ups.

Najib has a responsibility to uphold and a series of objectives to meet to drive the country forward. As the head of the government, he cannot allow dissent to undermine his administration.

He should not be distracted by infighting, especially when Barisan Nasional needs to consolidate and regroup for the next general election.

The rapport between the No 1 and the No 2 in the government and the party, is also crucial to ensure political fluency.

Political analyst Professor Datuk Abdul Halim Sidek said appointed ministers had the collective responsibility to support the prime minister and should refrain from making adverse opinions that contradicted the cabinet’s decisions.

“As a minister is appointed and handpicked by the prime minister, he must always toe the line. If he is unable to agree with the cabinet’s collective opinion, then he must step down and resign,” he told the New Straits Times yesterday.

He said the recent statements made by certain ministers were in contravention of the concept of collective responsibility.

“British politics have set an impeccable example; ministers who disagree with the prime minister should resign immediately.

“Based on what was uttered by certain ministers recently, the reshuffle comes as no surprise.”

Halim, the National Professors’ Council deputy political cluster head, said ministers who wished to make public and statements to the prime minister’s stand should have done so after tendering their resignations.

“A strong team can only be built if there is a spirit of togetherness.

“Realising this, the prime minister has displayed his authority and people who disagree with him must be weeded out.”

He said it was important for Najib to maintain unity in the government if it wanted to proceed with its national development agenda and to perform well in the next general election.

Najib’s new administration was not formed solely out of political interests, judging from the number of changes made — 17 reappointments, portfolio changes and inclinations. Only five were dropped from the list.

“The country’s economy is performing well and what is important now is to stop internal bickering.

“Now that he has put his house in order, it is up to the prime minister to navigate his course and his new team to follow him.”

Another political analyst, Associate Professor Dr Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani from Universiti Utara Malaysia, said Najib’s move to drop ministers was crucial to prevent them from creating a bad image of the government.

“This will be the last cabinet reshuffle before the next general election.

“That is why the prime minister needs a solid team behind him to face issues more effectively. He has also sent out a clear signal to newly appointed ministers that everyone in the cabinet must fully support the government’s agenda.”

Azizuddin said while Najib’s decision took many by surprise, the real challenge would be to prove the new line-up’s effectiveness in executing tasks.

“At the same time, it will be interesting to observe the reaction among Umno members and the public.

“If the criticism against Najib grows loud, it shows that the public has yet to warm up to the changes made. But, then again, public perception can change with time.”
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