

Malay/Muslim leaders cheer Masagos' promotion

Full minister appointment means two Malay Cabinet members for first time

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Mr MasagosZulkifli (standing) chatting with local visitors in Little India. He will be sworn in as Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs today. -- PHOTO: FACEBOOK PAGE OF PM LEE HSIEN LOONG

BY WALTER SIM

MALAY and Muslim community leaders yesterday welcomed news of Mr MasagosZulkifli's promotion to full minister, the first time there are two Malay members of Cabinet.

Mr Masagos, 51, will be sworn in as Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs today. He has been Senior Minister of State in both ministries since 2012.

Prime Minister Lee HsienLoong said of his promotion: "It is the first time we are having two Malay full ministers, which reflects the progress of the Malay community."

Communications and Information Minister Yaacob Ibrahim, who is also Minister- in-charge of Muslim Affairs, said: "I am happy that Masagos has been promoted to a full minister."

Association of Muslim Professionals chairman Azmoon Ahmad said the promotion is further proof that "Malays can stand tall in this meritocratic nation".

"It will create impetus for the community and encourage us and give us the confidence that Malays can succeed," he added.

Former Nominated MP and political watcher ZulkifliBaharudin said the appointment debunks the long-held idea in some quarters that there could be only one Malay minister. The move shows "we have moved forward, progress has been made".

Mr Masagos told The Straits Times that having two Malay full ministers for the first time in the nation's history "reflects the trust and recognition the Government has on the good progress made by the Malay/Muslim community".

"However, our value system puts meritocracy above all when appointments are made. That gives us the assurance that appointment is based on merit, not favour," he added.

"It's a good system that ensures confidence and respect for whoever is appointed."

Mr Masagos was chief executive officer of Singtel Global Offices before he entered politics in 2006. He was also a respected community leader, chairing Muslim welfare group Perdaus, and starting its humanitarian offshoot Mercy Relief.

After the 2006 General Election, he was appointed Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Education, and later for Home Affairs as well. In 2010, he was promoted to Minister of State, and the following year, gave up his Education portfolio for Foreign Affairs.

He became Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs in August 2012.

Fellow MPs were not surprised at his promotion, citing his diligence and commitment to the job. He has been actively involved in the fight against drugs and extremism, among others. He chairs a multi-agency task force that tackles youth drug abuse, and led a Singapore delegation to the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in February this year.

His promotion also means there are now two second ministers at Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs.

Mr Hri Kumar Nair, who heads the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Home Affairs and Law, said it was good to have three full ministers for a key portfolio like Home Affairs. He noted Mr Masagos' work in reshaping the rehabilitation systems for prisoners and drug offenders.

Mr Alex Yam, deputy chairman of the GPC for Defence and Foreign Affairs, said as a small country, Singapore placed a lot of emphasis on good relationships with neighbours and partners.

"Mr Masagos has established a wealth of contacts. His role as Second Minister will give additional clout when he negotiates on behalf of Singapore," he added.

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