



**New boss:** Hishammuddin being given a briefing at the Home Ministry in Putrajaya on Tuesday. The Home Ministry is where he can earn his stripes to bigger things.

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# Steeling up for new role

As Home Minister, Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein is in charge of a ministry which carries all the hot political buttons and he has indicated that he is prepared to be as tough as it takes.

**D**ATUK Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein's new office at the Home Ministry is half the size of the one he had as Education Minister.

The paintings which used to line the walls at his former ministry are stacked up in a corner because there is simply not enough wall space for them. And the giant *Tongkat Ali* he used to display with tongue-in-cheek is nowhere to be seen.

But looks can be deceiving. The Home Ministry is one of the most powerful portfolios in the Cabinet and makes Hishammuddin one of the most commanding figures in the country.

"It is a big leap from Education, a sign of the trust that the Prime Minister has in him. If he passes the test, anything is possible after that," said a Putrajaya insider.

In fact, he is relatively young to be taking on such a tremendous post but Home is where he can earn his stripes to bigger things. This is where some of the biggest and most complex government bodies are housed, namely the police, Immigration and Rela. He also oversees the National Registration Department, Pemandam and publication permits.

They are all hot political buttons, with their own set of issues ranging from basic staff welfare to national security.

And, as more than one former minister has learnt, it is also the place where one can fumble big-time if one is not careful.

That may explain why Hishammuddin, who is also an Umno vice-president, was in a rather pensive mood when he caught up with some journalists who had followed his career over the years.

Education was not easy because its policies go right down to the family unit and the reach is massive. But Home is a different kettle of fish altogether. The minister is up at the top but he still has to take advice from the big boys below him like the Inspector-General of Police and the Immigration boss.

Moreover, he is taking over in challenging times.

There are pressing issues, security has become a prime concern of Malaysians and law enforcement has never been more urgent. Moreover, society has become extremely critical and demanding of the very bodies that he now oversees.

Hishammuddin will be walking a tightrope in defending his men on the one hand and fulfilling public expectations on the other.

"It is a heavy responsibility, the fact that my signature on a document can affect a per-

son's life," he said.

His leadership style will be crucial. Rightly or wrongly, Hishammuddin's "establishment way" of tackling issues when he was Umno Youth leader had lent him a "soft image."

"He was not seen as somebody who bucked the trend or challenged authority as most Youth chiefs are expected to and some perceived him as *lembik* because of that," said the insider.

Things are about to change going by the signals that the minister gave out during the session with the media.

Among other things, he touched on how openness in the media has to come with responsibility. Areas he would not compromise on include national interest, religion and race, the

institution of the royalty, law and the Constitution; and the system of justice.

"If I have to take drastic action to defend these pillars, I am willing to do that," he said.

This thoroughbred politician has always talked about his famous father and grandfather, but had always been reticent about his ties with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, who is his first cousin.

He spoke openly about Najib at the meeting last Friday, referring to him as "my cousin" whom he knows as "Jib" in private conversations.

He spoke about Najib's extensive experience, the Malay gentleman in him and the way he wants to move forward.

His references to Najib were quite fascinating and appeared to convey two main points.

One was that his loyalty to Najib was beyond a shadow of a doubt and given that he was both Home Minister and cousin, it was what one would call a double-barrelled message.

The other was a caution of sorts, that no one should attempt to undermine Najib. He said Najib's emphasis on integrity, ability and loyalty in his team was clear. What was less publicised was that Najib would not tolerate people who undermined him.

The Prime Minister, he implied, was too noble to say it out loud but those who had tried to undermine him are regretting it now.

When Hishammuddin was the Education Minister, one of his top officials had said that it was sometimes hard to decipher when the minister was angry or pleased because he had a smiling face.

In fact, the most interesting part of the Home Minister's tough talk was that it was done in his usual disarming charm.

Hishammuddin has been called many names but he may eventually be also known as the smiling tiger.

