

23/11/1999

Abdullah Ahmad has done it all

Patvinder Singh

TAN Sri Abdullah Ahmad, Malaysia's Special Envoy to the United Nations, had his introduction to politics early in life when, as a Form Five student, he counted ballots in the July 1955 general election.

A student at the Sultan Ismail College in Kota Baru, he had to take an oath of secrecy before embarking on the task.

Counting began about 8pm and went on into the morning in the contest for the Pasir Mas parliamentary constituency.

"We were paid RM10 plus free transport and nasi bungkus. It was an exhilarating experience for me for here I saw practical politics. I got to take part in the democratic process.

"It never crossed my mind that I would one day be a candidate myself, and a (Deputy) Minister," the 62-year old political veteran said in the English-style study of his elegant home in the Federal capital's diplomatic enclave recently.

Abdullah said he had always leaned towards politics and writing, which explains why he left his studies to join The Straits Times, then at Robson House in Pudu.

"I became a reporter. There was a scarcity of Malay reporters and they asked me to cover politics, mainly Umno politics," he said.

Later the editor, Harry Miller, would entrust him with the task of him covering several constituencies in the 1959 general election.

"I covered all the electioneering, Opposition as well as Government parties.

"More importantly, I had to make assessments because a few days before polling, we would write profiles of candidates and predict who would win," Abdullah recalled.

Fortunately, his predictions came true.

He thought the best run campaign then was by (Tun Omar) Ong Yoke Lin, the former Dewan Negara president, who was standing in Kuala Kubu Baru.

"He treated media person like a celebrities. Even if he was not there at his headquarters, there was always satay, fried kueh teow and drinks 24 hours like a coffee-house," Abdullah said, adding that it was a hard campaign, generously-funded and very hospitable with the air of a festival.

He said hospitality and all-round communication were important, adding that hospitality could have worked for the Alliance in Setapak where its candidate, Umno's (Tan Sri) Aishah Ghani, stood against a Socialist Front candidate.

The Socialist Front's Ahmad Boestaman won as Abdullah thought he would, mainly through default as the Alliance in Setapak was not as media savvy as the Socialist Front.

Abdullah said those days, campaigning was definitely for more than a month. There was no television and people were dependent on whisper-campaigns and reading English and vernacular newspapers. This was why reporters were sought after and courted by all parties and candidates.

"I got all my predictions right. I said Umno would lose in Setapak which was true. I was right in Batu which the Socialist Front took.

Out of seven I predicted two losses for the Alliance and five wins," he said, adding that his worth rose in the eyes of the British editors.

In 1963, he joined former Prime Minister, the late Tun Abdul Razak, as political secretary and after a year got involved in organising the

election campaign for Razak while also becoming his press assistant.

"I was everywhere, mainly in Kelantan, which Pas won in 1959. We did very well but could not regain Kelantan.

"Then came 1969, the most tumultuous election. Free, virulent, violent," Abdullah said.

He said he believed the overzealousness and aggressiveness of Opposition parties led to the suspension of Parliament.

In 1974, he was asked by Razak to stand in the newly-created constituency of Machang in Kelantan which he won easily. He was then made Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department from 1974 to 1976.

"In 1976, I was detained under the Internal Security Act for five years and released by (Prime Minister Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) two weeks after he became Prime Minister," he said.

He left the country after that and has no recollection of the 1982 general election.

In 1986, he stood in Kok Lanang, Kelantan, and won there against Abdul Rahman Ahmad of Pas.

In 1990, he lost the seat to Sukri Mohamed of Semangat '46, in what he says was "the greatest disaster in Umno's annals when every Umno candidate in Kelantan was wiped out ironically through (Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk) Nik Aziz (Nik Mat)'s and (Kelantan Umno liaison chief Tengku) Razaleigh's joint effort.

"Now they are at each other's throats, a mere five years later. See how changeable politics is?"

Abdullah said his most memorable general elections were the 1964 and 1969 polls, given the relatively more lively and liberal atmosphere then.

Perhaps for someone who has had a varied and exciting life as a former ballot-counter, journalist, political secretary, polls strategist, prisoner of conscience and Deputy Minister, this special envoy may see something memorable in the pre-millennium polls after taking part in a pre-independence election.

(END)