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An election full of issues for voters

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THE sky was still dark when Datuk Abdul Aziz Sheikh Fadzir left his Kuala Lumpur home for Kedah at 5am, last Saturday.

The Umno Youth official planned to be in Padang Serai to lend moral support to the Barisan Nasional candidates who would be filing their nomination papers in Kulim.

Abdul Aziz comes from a well-known family in Kedah. His brother is Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir and he himself is Youth treasurer of the Padang Serai Umno division.

He arrived at the Umno office in Kulim a little after 8.30am to find a large crowd of about 2,000 Umno supporters already waiting. Shortly after, the Umno group marched towards the Kulim District Office together with the BN candidates.

It was one of those peculiar moments in politics because the parliamentary candidate for the opposition front is Saifuddin Nasution, previously, a top Umno Youth official but now with Parti Keadilan Nasional. Abdul Aziz stayed about an hour, then drove on to Permatang Pauh. This was going to be a hot seat and he wanted a word with some Umno friends there.

Around noon, he headed back for Kuala Lumpur. That was when the calls started coming in on his handphone.

"Umno people were calling me from all over because of so many rumours flying around that day ... Ismail Khamus, Hassan Ali, Ezam had won uncontested; the BN candidate in Parit had not turned up and so on ... all were untrue."

The calls had Abdul Aziz worried for a while because as he said, "you can never quite tell in an election."

But when the full candidates' lists from both sides were known by 3.30pm that afternoon, there was a marked relief in the BN camp. The big names were there, with contests in almost every single parliamentary and State seat, but the Opposition parties, the BN could see, was largely made up of political novices and unknowns.

"We knew from then that we were looking at a two-thirds majority," said Abdul Aziz from the 37th floor of the Putra World Trade Centre where he has been running the BN Youth operations centre since Parliament was dissolved.

The BN campaign machinery has since shifted into fifth gear. In fact, both the BN and the opposing side have been preparing for months for this event and this weekend will see both sides make the final sprint.

To say that this has been an exciting campaign is to understate the situation.

The campaign has acquired an urgency and intensity that has drawn parallels to the 1990 campaign when the Malays were under great pressure to decide on which was the better Malay party to lead them.

The focus this time around is again on the Malays. Events of the past year have touched much more the latter than the other communities and it will be interesting to see how they translate their opinions and feelings through the ballot.

The BN's campaign line, definitely, carries its own clout - peace and stability, experience and continuity, moderation and tolerance, independence and growth. The power of incumbency can never be underestimated.