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Delicate task of finalising BN list

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MONDAY morning dawned clear and cool but around mid-morning, the heavens opened and the rain came down in such a torrent that it almost obscured the view of the Prime Minister's Office in Putrajaya.

Reporters who had been waiting at the gate ran to their cars for shelter. It was one of those thankless moments in journalism.

Earlier at about 9am, they had seen Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Adnan Yaakob cruise past the gate in a chauffeured Mercedes Benz. He had given them a jaunty wave and grin but that was all for the car did not stop.

About half an hour later, the Malacca MB drove past, followed soon after by the MBs of Negri Sembilan and Johor - more waves and smiles but the reporters were looking for more than that.

They wanted clues to the Barisan Nasional candidate line-up for the general election.

The action for the larger part of last week was in Putrajaya, or to be specific, in the Prime Minister's spacious and high-ceilinged office where the list of BN candidates were being finalised.

The MBs, who came in their capacities as State Umno chiefs, were called one at a time into the room where Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had been huddled for four straight days with Umno top brass - Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, treasurer-general Tun Daim Zainuddin and vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

They sat in a semi-circle around the broad desk used by Dr Mahathir, going through the names, State by State and constituency by constituency; unsuccessful names were struck out with a pencilled line drawn on a ruler.

There was a larger, oval-shaped meeting table in the room but it was used for taking their meals because the meetings began at 9am and went on till late in the evening, breaking only for prayers.

The Umno list, alone, took the whole of Monday, but on Tuesday, the sessions with the other component parties went on till well past midnight.

By mid-week, Umno circles had begun referring to the meetings as "five-plus-one," meaning the above five plus the State party leader handling the lists.

The Umno list was the most time-consuming mainly because it carried the largest number of candidates and also because there were more factors involved and, as such, a little more complex.

Choosing a candidate from Umno is not only about whether the candidate would win, also he or she must be accepted by the local Umno division because the party grassroots does not take well to "imported faces".

Basically, Dr Mahathir as the Umno president and BN chairman, has to tread a fine line between new faces and the incumbents.

All of this might have been made easier if the representatives knew when it was time to make way for fresh blood but every political party is faced with this situation.

As a result, the "five-plus-one" team spent Wednesday fine-tuning the Umno list with some MBs being recalled for consultation.

In fact, the MBs had been told to be "on call" after the first meeting so there was no question of them flying home to their own States.

But some of them had to change hotels every night because Umno members kept turning up at their hotels to ask about the progress of the meetings and, of course, to lobby.

Adnan, the most obliging and approachable of them, was compelled to disconnect his hotel phone line in order to get some sleep.

Wednesday closed a little earlier because Dr Mahathir had an appointment at the World Cup Golf dinner at the Mines Resort and Golf Club.

"He looked in top form," said a journalist covering the event.

Thursday was spent on more fine-tuning with the Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Malacca Umno chiefs called in again.

Finally at about the time that most people were heading home for the evening, the PM's car was speeding towards the Putra World Trade Centre because he wanted a first hand look at the operations centre in the Umno headquarters.

(Incidentally that same afternoon, Tan Sri Musa Hitam, once deputy to Dr Mahathir and now an avid golfer was spotted in a relaxed mood at the World Cup of Golf tournament).

The good thing about Putrajaya is that it is not very accessible to people who otherwise would not think twice about swarming the PM's office to lobby him to retain this person or give that person a chance, or even for themselves.

"This is a smart building, not easy to get in. Only those with guts will find their way in," said an aide.

In that case, of the gutsy ones must be former Minister Datuk Napsiah Omar who turned up on Tuesday with another Wanita Umno politician, Azizah Samad, in tow. They left three hours later, Napsiah with her thumb up and lips sealed.

Another lobbying effort on behalf of the Wanita? Not at all improbable because this segment of Wanita Umno has no qualms about approaching the Prime Minister whether to raise an issue or make a request.

The "five-plus-one" meetings may have gone on behind closed doors but there are few secrets in politics and speculation of people being dropped, added or moved, made the rounds especially in the capital.

One would be told in the most certain of tones that so-and-so was finished, dropped! The next day, in equally confident tones, the same speaker would say that the same so-and-so had been retained.

Last minutes changes are not unusual because some candidates go to great lengths to be reinstated - from getting people to send in petitions to Dr Mahathir to a personal appeal to the man himself.

According to an MCA politician: "They lobby from north to south."

Serdang incumbent Datuk Yap Pian Hon is probably one of this election's most famous case of "dropped, then reinstated", lending currency to his reputation as the cat with nine lives.

Some very red faces were to be found in the media which had been on a speculation spree. Early in the week, many newspapers went to town reporting about a number of MBs expected to be dropped. But all of them were retained although several were moved to federal seats.

Likewise, some top civil servants expected to be fielded were also not in the list, including the one who told reporters that he was waiting "like a virgin".

The lesson to be learnt here is that getting on the list is the easy part. Making sure the name stays on the final list, now there's the challenge.

The BN list, in other words, remained somewhat fluid until late Thursday when candidates picked began getting the telephone call they had been waiting - and praying - for all week.

Thus, by Friday, the action had shifted from Putrajaya to the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers as they took on the task of informing all BN candidates in their own States.

Kedah was probably one of the last States to release its list. Menteri

Besar Tan Sri Sanusi Junid was apparently in Kuala Lumpur until late Thursday evening.

Previously, those picked would be informed by their State party chiefs.

This time around, the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers also handed over to candidates that all-important letter, carrying the BN chairman's famous slanting signature, and authorising them to register as BN candidates on nomination day.

The Alternative Front was playing a tactical game of watch and see. Their leaders dropped hints and teasers and released the names of their candidates in sputters at a series of news conferences.

Part of the reason is that the Opposition usually likes to know who the other side is putting up before deciding on their own candidates.

But it was no secret that they had problems with the distribution of some seats, in the choice of candidates and in getting the local party machinery to accept candidates from each other's party.

Thus, Parti Rakyat Malaysia member R. Sivarasa had to contest in Ampang Jaya under a Keadilan ticket. Zaiton Kassim, who is backed by feminist groups, is standing in Selayang as a DAP candidate.

Surprisingly, DAP which is notorious for making known its candidates late in the night before nomination day, released their list by Friday evening. The Kelantan Pas line-up was also one of the earlier known lists this time.

The full Keadilan list was still largely a mystery until nomination morning.

Printing presses have been running full steam since Thursday. Many candidates, especially the incumbents had already booked their printers weeks in advance.

"The quotation is done, the block is ready ... just waiting for the photo to go in. Everything can be ready in a matter of hours. We are just waiting for the word go," an Umno hopeful from Kelantan said.

Whereas the action had earlier been centred in Putrajaya and the MBs/CMs, attention by yesterday had shifted completely to the nomination centres and the candidates who now embarks on nine days of intense campaigning.

The following week will be no less interesting and exciting as Malaysians decide on who will lead them into the new millennium.

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