

14/11/1999

Long wait for both sides is over

Joceline Tan

IT had been a long day by the time the special assistant to a Minister arrived home at about 9pm, Tuesday. Someone was waiting to see him and it was past 11pm when he finally headed for the shower and to prepare for bed.

That was when the phone rang. It was the Minister asking him to come over to his house. Five minutes later, the phone rang again; the Minister told him it was urgent and to come immediately.

By then, the ministerial aide knew this was not going to be any ordinary meeting and he broke the speed limit getting to the Minister's house where the senior private secretary and several others were already waiting. Someone was dispatched to fetch the political secretary.

The PM, the Minister told them, was likely to dissolve Parliament the next day.

The Minister had just come from the wedding reception of the daughter of Klang Umno division head Datuk Zakaria Mohd Deros where the guest list included the who's who of Umno and the conversation that evening had revolved around the prospect of Parliament being dissolved the next day.

The headline news that evening had been the Prime Minister's sudden cancellation of his attendance at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's reason for not going to South Africa - "urgent matters at home" - was analysed and dissected by the Umno guests.

The other hint was that the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers had been summoned to Kuala Lumpur for a meeting the next day and a news conference had been scheduled the same afternoon by the Prime Minister's office.

In short, up to that very evening, few people could say for sure what was on Dr Mahathir's mind.

Most, including the BN people, were already getting used to the idea that polls would be next year because the heightened election mood about the time of the Prime Minister's return from New York in September had somewhat evaporated.

"PM fooled everyone - BN, the opposition, everyone!" says Kelantan Umno politician Mohd Alwi Che Ahmad.

Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang was said to be fuming. He was seen pacing up and down the long stretch of lobby in Parliament on Wednesday morning, about the time that news came out that the Prime Minister had had an audience with the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

A Ministry official said he had never seen the DAP leader in such a state.

Hours later, he dashed off a Press statement, lambasting the dissolution of Parliament mid-way through the Budget session as "outrageous" and "wasteful".

His national organising secretary Kerk Kim Hock used a poker term popular among the Chinese to describe the surprise - he said Dr Mahathir had stunned everyone by "playing against the logic".

"He did it again," says Kerk.

The reaction from the political field ranges from rippling excitement to outright relief now that the event they have been waiting for is in sight.

According to Mohd Alwi, the Umno camp is in a "buoyant mood".

"We were ready six months ago," adds incumbent Kota Setar MP Datuk Chor Chee Heung.

The opposition parties have been going on about Umno being afraid to

face an election, but the Umno election machinery is actually raring to take off.

Far from being afraid, the Umno side is just as keen as Parti Keadilan Nasional members to settle the question of mandate at the polls.

"It's going to be interesting. I think the polls will prove whether (Datuk Seri) Anwar (Ibrahim) has the support he claims to have," says a think-tank analyst.

Those in the opposite camp are frankly relieved the waiting has ended.

"In any election, there is always the feeling that you need more time but we are ready to fight it out," says Kerk.

But the campaign proper has yet to begin although the lights in the string of operations rooms throughout the country have begun burning through the night.

The heat and fury will begin only from nomination day after the candidates are known and the battle lines etched in detail.

In fact, from now until nomination, the incumbents, whether from the ruling coalition or the opposition, are likely to be on tenterhooks wondering whether they will be retained or whether they will be moved to another constituency or from State to Parliament or vice-versa.

Even the most diligent and well-connected of incumbents are not free from such pre-election jitters.

Many of them are keeping a low profile, cutting down on functions and appointments and even declining to speak to the Press.

A wakil rakyat, when contacted at home, says she spends her evenings praying.

This is also the period when speculation is rife of people being dropped as candidates or moved around.

The names being talked about the last few days include a dizzying array of Menteri Besar and even Ministers. Going by the grapevine, up to seven Menteri Besar will either be moved to a Federal seat or retired off.

Frankly, apart from a few politicians holding key party posts and who are in a decision-making position about candidates, the rest are mostly in the dark about where they are going or whether they will be dropped.

Says an MP speculated to be relocated: "Frankly, I don't know. Nobody really knows where they are going. There's not been a word."

But basically, there is a discernible feeling among the Umno rank and file that some wakil rakyat have overstayed, of the need for a good mix of experienced and new faces, of the need for wakil rakyat who reflect a global outlook, technocratic finesse and an open mind to issues of the new generation - environment, good governance, information technology.

Umno, in particular, likes to hold back the contents of the list until just a few days before nomination.

The reason is not difficult to guess: the quest to become a wakil rakyat in Umno is always much more intense than in other parties and releasing the list any earlier would only lead to even more excessive lobbying.

Some claim the Umno list is ready, with perhaps some fine-tuning going on. Others say it is changing by the minute as people, especially incumbents make appeals to the powers-that-be.

"Believe me, grown men and women have shed tears and gone on their knees to be retained," says an Umno politician.

Potential Umno candidates have been told that they will be informed on Monday/Tuesday. But that has not stopped some from lobbying just to be on the safe side.

The MCA list is more or less finalised and some candidates, it is said, have even been informed.

The MCA process of selection this time around is less messy because party members at the last AGM gave their president the mandate to decide

on the choice of candidates.

The president, says MCA's Chor, is well-placed to decide because he is fully aware of the performance of party wakil rakyat.

Apparently, Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik knows who has been working and who has not. He is sort of like a political Santa Claus who knows who's been naughty and who's been good.

The opposition parties have also been busy.

The day after Parliament was dissolved, their high-level council comprising two top leaders from each party hunkered down for final talks at Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah's house. Party leaders were tight-lipped about what went on.

The educated guess is that they were finalising seat allocation among the four component parties although DAP chairman Dr Chen Man Hin vaguely described it as "making preparations for the general election".

There is much speculation about where key opposition figures will contest. Keadilan president Dr Wan Azizah, it is said, is likely to stand in Lembah Pantai while her deputy Dr Chandra Muzaffar is said to be slotted for Bandar Tun Razak.

But the question on everyone's lips is where Anwar will stand and whether his nomination will be allowed. Anwar's candidacy is likely to be an issue of some controversy on nomination day and many expect the party to bring the matter to the courts if Anwar is disqualified from contesting.

In the meantime, Malaysians are bracing themselves for what promises to be one of the most keenly contested polls in Malaysian electoral history.

And as the above think-tank analyst points out, many Malays regard the election as a referendum on Dr Mahathir and his government.

Like it or not, the opposition campaign will be driven by what has happened to Anwar. It has, in the last few months, achieved what it wanted - driving home the message that certain reforms need to take place in this country.

But it has been unable, thus far, to convince the people that the coalition of Pas, Keadilan, DAP and PRM is best qualified to implement these changes.

And it is now up to the BN to convince the same audience that it is more qualified for the job.

(END)