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And the journey begins again

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WHAT a journey this has been. And in some ways, the journey is not over yet. For many, the journey begins all over again.

All those involved in the general election one way or the other are on some form of journey.

And none can be more challenging than the ones to be taken by the victors as their names were announced one after the other on Sunday night and yesterday.

The most significant journey is that taken by the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who begins his trek towards a Malaysia that is Cermerlang, Gemilang and Terbilang.

Surrounded by Pressmen at his first Press conference after claiming victory in the wee hours yesterday morning, Pak Lah stayed true to his earlier declaration: "We must make sure our wakil rakyat give first class service."

The report card of the state assemblymen and MPs will be scrutinised because the people's endorsement of the Barisan Nasional reflects the trust they have on him, his administration and policies, besides the approaches he will undertake to bring the nation to glory and excellence.

Waiting for results to trickle in on the 39th floor of the Putra World Trade Centre where Umno has its headquarters, Abdullah was a picture of calm and dignity.

Surrounded by his wife Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, family members, political mates, confidants and friends, the BN chairman was soaking in the atmosphere as he savoured every win.

There were handshakes and back slapping all round. Handphones were at everyone's ear while short text messages were also coming in fast.

A few Cabinet members arrived to join the celebration - Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Jalil, Tengku Datuk Adnan Tengku Mansor and Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir - were among those who offered congratulations to their boss.

There were plenty of hugs and when the BN got a simple majority, a doa was recited by Che Mat Che Ali from the religious department. The mood was one of dignified, quiet jubilation, not loud and boisterous.

Abdullah, in a grey collared T-shirt and matching dark coat and pants, took calls from several members of his Cabinet from their respective kawasan. Several menteri besar also called and wished each other well.

There were on-the-spot analyses, too, as to the possible reasons for the best-ever BN victory and the almost complete defeat of Pas and Keadilan.

People I spoke to there attributed this to Abdullah's personality more than anything else, besides the Islam Hadhari concept he introduced.

The soft-spoken, clean image of Pak Lah had won new friends and voters to the point that the people of Terengganu had reinstated the BN to power and ended their brief fling with Pas.

A member of the Cabinet said the BN's victory is the result of hard work and perseverance put in in the last four years, which saw a period of hard and soft-pounding in Kelantan and Terengganu, which led to the many wins.

The people of Kelantan and Terengganu have shown their displeasure and disillusionment with Pas by throwing their wakil rakyat and candidates out of the State Assembly and Parliament.

A senior party man said the BN, and particularly Umno, likened the 1999

election defeat in Terengganu as a blessing in disguise. That defeat exposed many realities which Abdullah will rectify, I'm sure.

The BN, and more so Umno, had reflected on that defeat deeply. Turning the tables on Pas within one term of its reign shows that Umno and the people had learnt their lessons well.

At about 10 to 1am, Pak Lah turned to the crowd and told them that his former boss, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, had telephoned and offered his congratulations. There were handclaps and cameras were clicking away as a new moment in history dawned.

Looking at Abdullah, one would never know that he had gone through a gruelling period of criss-crossing the nation by road and air to spread his words far and near.

On the contrary, Abdullah looked younger, fitter and fresher than he had ever been since assuming office on Oct 31 last year.

On the ground floor of the PWTC's podium block, Press photographers took pictures of those who came to wish the PM.

At the Dewan Tun Hussein Onn, accredited members of the media were joined by party members and supporters who had gathered to catch a glimpse of the man of the hour.

At about 1.45am, Abdullah obliged them and was greeted by shouts of "Hidup Pak Lah" as he made his way through the crowd to the stage where he made a short victory speech.

Originally, the Prime Minister was to have his first Press conference in that hall but the newsmen were outnumbered.

It would have been difficult to conduct a proper Press conference without the questions and answers being drowned by the sound of celebrations.

The media conference was then moved to the Mawar Room.

I had covered many election-night Press conferences before, starting with the one held at Rumah Sabah along Jalan Ampang when Dr Mahathir led his first general election in 1982.

After that, all election-night media conferences were held at the PWTC. None of the previous ones had started earlier than 3am.

Well, many new wakil rakyat will now start on another journey of their political career.

If they follow the ground rules well, keep to their promises and trek every nook and corner of their kawasan, they will find their journey worthwhile and rewarding.

Not only for themselves but for their constituents as well. Syabas and Selamat Maju Jaya!