

01/03/2004

And now for the candidates

Kalimullah Hassan

THE prickly issue of the Barisan Nasional's seat allocation is settled. Barely days are left before BN chairman and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi decides to dissolve Parliament and go for the polls - eight months ahead of schedule.

In the days ahead, the issue at hand is to pick candidates, ward off the lobbyists, and smoothen the ruffled feathers of warlords who may not get their way.

It took all of two days to sort out the distribution of 219 parliamentary and 505 state seats (excluding Sarawak, which is not holding a state election) among 14 component parties.

It is no mean feat to manage the expectations of not only strong-minded component party presidents but also their equally strong-headed supreme councils and millions of members.

But as in every election, the BN partners never get everything they want and no party emerges 100 per cent satisfied.

The job of the presidents is to minimise dissatisfaction at the grassroots and to get members to work for the coalition's victory.

While the opposition parties - only three: Pas, Keadilan and the DAP - have been grappling with the allocation issue for months and are still not close to home, the BN's success in managing larger numbers is a root factor that has ensured its survival as the ruling party since Independence.

The spirit of give-and-take, compromise and consensus has always been the BN's strongest asset. This time again, almost all the parties have compromised in the interest of the coalition and in the spirit of power-sharing.

Umno, as the dominant partner, could have taken all 22 of 25 new parliamentary seats where Malay voters are the majority or dominant. It took only 10. It even gave up a traditional stronghold, the Bukit Gantang parliamentary seat in Perak, to the People's Progressive Party, to ensure no one left the negotiating table dissatisfied.

Parti Bersatu Sabah, for example, wanted 21 state seats in Sabah, expecting to get the 17 it won in the 1999 state elections. It accepted 13 state seats and was compensated with an extra parliamentary seat.

United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Organisation (Upko), which in 1999 won only two state seats, was given six although its president, Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, lost while he was the incumbent Chief Minister.

The MCA gave up its Yong Peng seat to Umno, and was in return given the Wangsa Maju seat, now held by Umno, in the Federal Territory.

The MCA, MIC, Gerakan and the other components in Sabah and Sarawak, too, had higher expectations, as did Umno, but in every case, they compromised and all went away perhaps not fully satisfied but certainly contented that everyone had been treated fairly.

Managing members' expectations will be difficult, but it will be done. It may actually be easier than previous elections because of the much talked-about "feel good" factor prevailing in favour of the BN.

But as all the BN leaders know, managing the expectations of the masses is so much easier than managing the expectations of individuals. Therein, as in every election, lies the test for each component party.

The selection of candidates has begun. Abdullah's criteria for candidates are that they must be able to withstand voter scrutiny, be able

to serve and have a good track record.

He has said that being a warlord is not a criterion for candidacy.

Further, given the BN leadership's desire to prepare the next generation to take over the helm, and that 60 per cent of the country's population are youths, there will certainly be many new, younger candidates.

The advantage is that there are 26 new parliamentary seats (including Putrajaya, created before the redelineation exercise) and 63 state seats, but at the same time, some of the much older - and maybe some of the non-performers who are younger - will have to make way for others.

There will be a mix of old faces, not-so-old faces and new faces. But the problems arise with those who do not see the writing on the wall and some, having served many, many terms, still refuse to give up.

Suddenly, we hear their pronouncements that they are still healthy, they still exercise or do 20 laps around the swimming pool, that they can still serve and want to serve.

It is very much a Malaysian culture that even prime ministers and party presidents find it more difficult to say no to those who have given service in the past. They are torn between respect for the elders and a desire for regeneration for the sake of the future.

There may be lessons to be learnt from 1999 when despite all evidence indicating then Terengganu Menteri Besar Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad was perceived to have overstayed after 25 years at the State's helm, he was allowed to contest after pleading for a seat. The resultant voter dissatisfaction saw the BN lose Terengganu to Pas after having controlled the State for 38 years.

Maybe another example is the DAP. Its secretary-general Lim Kit Siang has dominated the party since the mid-1960s, and first became a Member of Parliament in 1969. Karpal Singh was active from about the same time and became an elected representative in 1974. They are both like the proverbial banyan tree under whose shadow little or nothing grows.

Over the years, leaders like Fan Yew Teng, Goh Hock Guan, Lee Lam Thye, Sim Kwang Yang and Wee Choo Keong, among others, have been sidelined and fallen by the wayside.

Today, if name recognition is anything to go by, Kit Siang, Karpal, Lim's son Guan Eng, current secretary-general Kerk Kim Hock and Dr Tan Seng Giaw are the few whom voters know and can identify with.

In Kit Siang's shadow, few of the younger party leaders have made much impact and the DAP has lost its potency as an opposition party. Even in the worst of times for the BN in 1999, Kit Siang and Karpal lost both their state and parliamentary seats contested in Penang.

Today, they are likely to contest again. Maybe in different seats. And they probably have to, for the sake of the DAP's survival. Because without Kit Siang and Karpal, the DAP identity as an opposition party is not strong at all.

In that sense, Pas has done much better, having groomed and fielded younger, professional leaders such as Hussam Musa, Syed Azman Syed Ahmad, Takiyuddin Hassan and Nasharuddin Mat Isa, among others.

The veterans in Pas, such as Hassan Shukri and Subky Latiff, have been more willing to take a back seat and continue to help the party.

The best examples that BN leaders can look upon are those of their own leaders, the late Tun Hussein Onn and recently-retired Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Both stepped down at the peak of their power.

When Dr Mahathir became Prime Minister, he brought many young and promising Umno members into senior positions in Government.

Abdullah was one of them, as are many members of the Cabinet and Government now, whether at state or Federal level.

At this election, Abdullah will bring in new faces to blend with the

experienced ones he will retain.

The challenge is not for the masses to be able to accept the new ones.

It is for the older leaders, who have served loyally and diligently, to realise that they should make the job easier for the Prime Minister and the party by helping him prepare young Malaysians to lead the charge.

That, they can only do if they realise their shortcomings and accept the reality that they are not men for all seasons. Not many of us in this world are born with that distinction.