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Resounding 'yes' for Abdullah

EACH time Malaysia embraces a new Prime Minister, it has never failed to show heart and a renewed faith in itself. A burst of national fellow-feeling lifts the election numbers to dizzying heights.

Shortly after the Federation came into being, the electorate in 1964 gave Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra 89 of 104 seats in Parliament. In 1974, the country bestowed nearly nine of every 10 seats at stake to Tun Abdul Razak Hussein. Tun Hussein Onn won only five seats fewer from the same total of 154 in 1978. Four years later, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad earned 132 seats or 86 per cent of the Dewan Rakyat for his mandate to govern on the platform of Bersih, Cekap, Amanah.

And so it was for Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. As a test of his popularity, the Prime Minister-elect could have carried the 2004 general election on charm alone. But yesterday's vote was more than a referendum on personality. Abdullah had fixed an agenda and spelt it out in a Barisan Nasional manifesto that was not just an exercise in public relations. The catch phrase "Excellence, Glory, Distinction" marks the arrival of not just a new leader, but a new era. We now have a Prime Minister who has been chosen less for who he is than for what he has set out to do.

Central to Abdullah's reform programme was a more fundamental question. Voters were asked to decide on the kind of state and society they want Malaysia to be, to choose between progressive Islam and radical theocracy.

The answer depended on BN doing better than it did in 1999 by winning more than two-thirds of the parliamentary seats and more than 56.5 per cent of the popular vote. It also had to make sizable inroads in the "crescent States" of Kelantan and Terengganu, and hold on to Kedah and Perlis.

That turned out to be a modest aim. Umno not only sent Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang back to his redoubt of Rusila in Terengganu but may have won the glittering prize of Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat's Kelantan. The BN landslide, however, is not merely redemption for Umno and the BN. It is again a victory for the common sense and pragmatism of the people. Since 1955, the electorate has consistently rejected the politics of extremism in favour of moderation - even when their emotions threatened to overwhelm their reason, as it did in 1969 and 1999.

Overall, the mandate for the country's next Government was tallied without fuss and bother. But there were glitches that must count heavily against the Election Commission, whose efficient conduct of the polls is a mainstay of the country's democracy.

The 11th general election, widely forecast to spring only tepid surprises, has pulled a few big ones on us. The minor, but nonetheless serious, blots on the vote caused by the EC's mishaps should not affect the simple fact that the people have spoken.

Unexpectedly, the Opposition added spice to the broad-based staple on which Malaysia wants to be nourished. Our Prime Ministers have historically brought with them reconciliation, change and a suspension of division and discord. Yesterday, Abdullah was accorded a resounding authorisation to deliver a Government worthy of its people.