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There's no hiding the gold and the dross in politics

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NOMINATION Day at last raised the curtain on the 2004 general election battles to be fought for the nation's 219 parliamentary and 505 state assembly seats. KALIMULLAH HASSAN pans an analyst's lens across the crowded stage and scrutinises the contests building for Election Day.

IT is not a life ordinary mortals would wish for. Leaving home early, flying to Penang, officiating at functions where the drawn-out pleasantries and blistering heat sap your energy, meeting supporters, attending briefings, squeezing in interviews with the media, having prayers and a kenduri with a thousand people, shaking every hand, and sitting down with supporters, lawyers and aides into the small hours.

In between, candidates who have been dropped or are still hoping for a last-minute miracle buttonhole the Prime Minister, further sapping a mind bogged down with a myriad other details.

And just when he wants to break for some sleep at 2.30am, an unthinking acquaintance drives in from Kuala Lumpur "to say hello", knowing full well that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has to get up in a few hours to file his nomination papers for his Kepala Batas constituency.

That was the Prime Minister's schedule on Friday, March 12, 2004.

But always patient, smiling, and with a gentle word for friend or foe alike, Abdullah bespeaks a good nature sorely lacking in politics.

It is at times like this that we see the best and the worst in man.

As in other elections, it is those from whom Malaysia expects the highest standards - Islamist, socialist or democrat - who often show their worst side.

In Johor, a young man who has loyally served the party prepared to contest a state seat with the promise and expectation of being made Menteri Besar and to lead the charge of the BN into 2020.

But, for Datuk Khaled Nordin, it was not to be.

Right from the beginning, attempts were being made to prevent him being that chosen one, and on the eve of nominations his detractors won, managing to bring in outside influence that could precipitate a crisis.

In a battle, the foot soldier often gets sacrificed for the larger war. Khaled Nordin has become that sacrificial lamb because of the desire of a retiring assemblyman to become Menteri Besar and because of that man's complicity with a force outside the political sphere.

But that is not the only incident.

The opposition Democratic Action Party and kiss-and-make-up partner Pas have again "severed ties permanently" after the Pas president described DAP's Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh as "medicine whose shelf life has expired".

In 1999, the DAP sat hand-in-glove with Pas and Parti Keadilan Nasional to oppose the BN, burnishing Pas' dream of an Islamic state.

In 1990, Karpal had publicly declared that an Islamic state would be formed "over my dead body".

In 1999, after having assisted Pas to win in Kelantan and Terengganu, Lim went to visit his friend Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang in Terengganu. The famous Hadi-Kit Siang hug was splashed all over Pas' official newspaper, Harakah.

And today, when the DAP's Chinese constituency is frightened of Hadi's declarations, the DAP says it will never be friends with Pas again. It also said this in 1990.

Leaders of the DAP's Negri Sembilan branch have quit the party and abandoned the ideals they profess to believe in because they could not get the seats they wanted to contest.

And then there's Pas' Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat. Gentle, friendly and all-in-all, a nice enough person.

He sat together with Keadilan's president Datin Seri Wan Azizah Wan Ismail and Parti Rakyat Malaysia president Dr Syed Husin Ali at the same forum for years, until Syed Husin was picked by the merged Keadilan-PRM entity to contest the Kota Baru parliamentary seat.

Nik Aziz says socialists are as bad as communists. Wan Azizah criticises Nik Aziz. Syed Husin, rejected, pulls out and does not want to contest.

Whither friendship? Whither loyalty?

Umno picks a professional who offers himself to help the party in opposition-held Kelantan. The man is groomed, developed and when election comes, given a state seat to contest.

In anger, he closes down his operations room, his aides tip off the Press and a crisis is building. In such last-minute tactical pullbacks, the party has no choice but to compromise. The candidate gets his parliamentary seat candidacy and his operations room resumes functioning.

There is another professional who has been lobbying for a parliamentary seat in Kedah for years. Finally, he is chosen to contest a state seat in his own constituency.

And what does he do? He goes to Menteri Besar Datuk Syed Razak Syed Zain and politely declines.

And what of the infamous Datuk Ibrahim Ali? Sulking because he was not promoted as Kelantan deputy head of Umno, he began agitating against his Umno colleagues, claiming he had been more loyal to the party than them, and more hardworking than anyone else.

Then came the appointment of new pro-tem heads of Umno in accordance with the new delineation of constituencies. Ibrahim was dropped. That was when his loyalty also ended.

In 1990, when he was in Semangat 46, he swore in public that if he ever joined Umno, he would kiss the posterior of the Umno leader first.

He was among the first high-profile Semangat 46 leaders to join Umno in the early 1990s and when he joined, he professed undying loyalty to Umno.

Today, Ibrahim Ali is fighting as an independent in Pasir Mas against Umno.

There are many sad examples of politicians, from the BN and Opposition alike, who in the last few years have publicly said they would step down and not contest.

They are all contesting, making various excuses and giving different reasons, which eventually boil down to saying, "the party and the country need me".

Really?

And of course, the component party head in the BN who kept subtly threatening to withdraw if his party was not given seats to contest. He has got his seats, causing so much heartache to so many who eventually relented because of the "Barisan spirit".

The BN is fortunate in that it has over the years upheld the spirit of compromise, and has always had among its members a majority who are genuinely committed to the cause of power-sharing and the ideals that have kept the coalition in power since Independence.

Yesterday's results - winning 14 parliamentary and seven state seats uncontested - are a strong indicator that despite having a few bad apples, the party has the strongest following in the country and will thwart a disorganised and rag-tag team of opposition parties that have never been able to get their act together, save for that brief period in 1999.

The BN has its heroes such as Dr Azam Raudzan, who patiently waited to serve and was rewarded when the last name read out by Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Ghani Othman turned out to be his. His name on the list was handwritten, indicating he was a last-minute inclusion.

Azam was happy. Yesterday, he was happier. He won the Penawar state seat uncontested.

Then there is former Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib. Once a rising star in national politics, his career was cut short after he was detained in Australia for not declaring a large stash of money.

Muhammad resigned and went through court battles in Australia and Malaysia. He was finally cleared but his political career was as good as over.

For the last five years, despite not having any political position, Muhammad has campaigned tirelessly at every by-election, been present whether or not his services were needed, and to many grateful Umno politicians, Muhammad deserved to be given a second chance.

But when he was informed last week that he would not be contesting, he did not sulk. And yesterday, he was on the ground, campaigning tirelessly for the party he believes in.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad could have stayed at home or gone on holiday, but instead has been campaigning tirelessly for the party he says gave him the opportunity to serve his nation.

He was out again yesterday to support the party he says had supported him all these years.

In a season where weakness of character emerges more often than strength, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is another example of sturdiness.

Sacked as a minister in 1987, he stood by Umno and the BN, campaigning tirelessly for it through its worst crisis in 1988, selling his house to support his politics. In 1991, he was brought back into Government.

Defeated by the largest display of money politics in Umno in 1993 in his quest to retain the Umno vice-presidency, Abdullah remained steadfastly loyal.

His loyalty was rewarded when he became Deputy Prime Minister in 1999 and Prime Minister last October.

Like Muhammad and Dr Mahathir, Abdullah did not attempt to sabotage his party. Like them and the many other "good ones", he just soldiers on.