

A fresh breeze is blowing in

THE 1999 election issues are no more. The once-chummy relationship between Keadilan and Pas has begun to turn sour. People are looking to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for leadership, writes **KALIMULLAH HASSAN**.

THOSE WERE THE ANGRY TIMES. Those were the irrational times. Friends turned their backs on friends. The pulpit became a platform to articulate rancour and the streets became a playhouse for rowdy, at times violent, protests.

But 1998 has passed. As has 1999. These are calmer times today. "Reformasi" is no longer a buzzword. The Saturday demonstrations that used to shut down the heart of Kuala Lumpur have ceased.

Reminders of those troubled times remain in the grimy political graffiti on public walls and the back lanes of Bangsar. The black-eye image still surfaces, although rarely, and to most Malaysians, just as that black eye healed, so have the scars of that divisive period.

It is against this setting that Parliament was dissolved on March 4. It is in these more tranquil times that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi seeks his first mandate as leader of Malaysia.

In the last few years, and in particular in the recent weeks of rising election temperatures, many of the principal actors of the post-Anwar and financial crisis period have either faded away or crossed the chasm and returned to the Umno fold.

Dr Chandra Muzaffar, lawyer Zainur Zakaria, Ruslan Kassim, Hanafiah Man and the many mid-level Keadilan officials who were the organisers of rallies and protests, and the voice of the party to the outside world, have hung up their boots.

Many now sit on the other side of that divide. The ordinary citizens who expressed their displeasure at the ballot box in 1999 and for that brief moment revelled in the garb of rebels now see their Malaysia in another light.

The Alternative Front was, at best, a bargain-basement imitation of the coalition it intended to replace. Barely months after the 1999 elections, the Democratic Action Party parted acrimoniously with Parti Islam, unable to accept the theocratic regime's push for its brand of an Islamic state.

Not too long after, the DAP became estranged from Keadilan, accusing the party of trying to impose its will on them.

Even the once-chummy relationship between Keadilan and Pas began to turn a little sour, with both parties squabbling over seats and sharing. The man who had held the threads together between the two parties, Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor, a (lose friend and comrade of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, died two years ago and was succeeded by Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang.

Unlike Fadzil, Hadi shares little commonality with Anwar or his cause, and the once highly publicised get-togethers of the two parties' leaders became less

and less frequent.

On nomination day on March 13, the opposition parties tried to have a cohesive opposition. In some areas, they managed to have a straight fight, but the BN's first day score of 14 parliamentary and seven state seats uncontested showed how disorganised the "Barisan Alternatif" were.

Further, Hadi attacked Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh as politicians whose "shell life had expired" and Lim retaliated with equally colourful vitriol.

Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat criticised Dr Syed Husin Ali, deputy president of the merged Keadilan-Parti Rakyat Malaysia entity and refused to accept him as an opposition candidate in Kota Baru.

Syed Husin, dejected, refused to contest and Datin Wan Azizah Wan Ismail criticised Nik Aziz.

In the following days, the BN won another parliamentary seat when the Pas candidate against Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar pulled out. It won another four state seats in Sabah and Johor the same way.

Pas won one state seat in fortress Johor on a technicality.

Campaigning has begun with a vigour, but the Opposition has not managed to revive the frenzy of 1999. It is not going to happen in these remaining days.

And where the Opposition has continued to splinter into more and more unmendable pieces, the BN has strengthened, coming together day by day into a more cohesive force than the dazed creature it seemed to have been in 1999.

The coalition's two major Chinese parties, MCA and Gerakan, shook the proverbial hand of friendship in public and subtly undermined each other in the last elections.

Today, for the first time in their history, they have held joint Chinese New Year and unity gatherings and are campaigning together. MCA has had a leadership change, from Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik to Datuk Sen Ong Ka Ting.

The baggage that existed between Ling and Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik is not present in the Ong-Lim relationship.

Parti Bersatu Sabah, which opposed the BN in 1999 rejoined the ruling coalition two years ago and is enjoying the homecoming in being one of the staunchest allies of Umno in the Sabah Government.

The economy has recovered and is surging. Growth exceeded expectations last year and is poised to do even better in 2004. Umno has had a smooth transition from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Abdullah and all the predictions of uncertainty have dissipated in the four months of the new premiership.

Yes, there are problems, too, in the BN. Umno is facing an uphill battle to regain ground in Kelantan, but even Pas acknowledges that the BN will not do worse than in 1999. There are still those in Kelantan Umno who would rather let the party sink because their egos have been bruised.

But then, it was the infighting which saw Umno lose to Pas in Kelantan in 1999. So what's new?

If anything, with the injection of new blood through professionals such as Datuk Awang Adek Hussin, Datuk Zaid Ibrahim and the likeable Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, and minus the issues of 1999, Kelantan Umno stands a more than decent chance of loosening Pas' stranglehold on the State.

Likewise in Terengganu, where after tasting life as underdogs, State Umno chieftains have laboured to regain voter confidence. They are in a stronger position today, with a great chance to win many more seats, both at the state and parliamentary level.

In Kedah, the divisiveness that came from the abrupt leadership change from Tan Sri Osman Aroff to Tan Sri Sanusi Junid in the mid-1990s manifested itself in 1999. Weakened further by the issues of 1999, Kedah Umno suffered reeling setbacks, managing to hold on to its majority by the skin of its teeth.

There are new and more acceptable faces in Kedah this election. The fight is still tough. Its one-to-one in all seats. But if the Kedah BN gets its act together, chances are it will regain its two-thirds majority.

The BN has strengthened. It can only do better than in 1999. All things being equal, the worst-case scenario for it would be to retain its status quo. But in the last four months, the opposition parties have realised that there is a new storm blowing in their direction and they have little recourse for shelter.

Abdullah confounded sceptics and analysts with his policy initiatives and his different style and approach. Much as the majority of Malaysians loved Dr Mahathir, as seen by the open demonstration of affection as his term drew to an end, Abdullah has touched hearts in a different way.

There have been no personal attacks on any opposition leader nor abrasive confrontation with any group.

Abdullah has addressed the festering issue of graft with high-profile prosecutions; re-introduced a little more faith in the police through his appointment of the new Inspector-General of Police and his deputy; is trying to improve public delivery systems, cutting red tape and increasing efficiency in the public sector; applying prudent fiscal management by cancelling high-cost projects; boosting the agricultural sector to create more sources of wealth; re-building relations with other countries; and most of all, doing it with a smile on his face, a clear conscience and no malice.

Maybe many of the policies have yet to bear fruit. Maybe some will falter along the way only to be re-invented. Maybe many things. But at this juncture, the Malaysian public is by-and-large enamoured of the new Prime Minister, who has remained the same decent Mr Nice Guy through 35 years of public service.

The angry times seem to have passed. The fresh breeze that Abdullah has brought has made him the BN's best weapon. And all things now not being equal for the Opposition, there is no question, really, of whether the BN will win its two-thirds majority.

The question is by how much more.