

by A Kadir Jasin

# Finding a Balance

The list of candidates for the general election shows that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is both fair and serious in initiating change for the betterment of all Malaysians.

**T**HE LINE-UP of Barisan Nasional (BN) candidates for the general election shows that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is serious about offering the people a better choice.

In some states, as many as 60% of the candidates are new. This is more apparent among Umno candidates although other BN parties have also introduced numerous new faces.

The enlargement of Parliament from 193 to 219 seats and the state legislative assemblies from a total of 504 to 567 seats has facilitated the fielding of more fresh candidates by both the ruling and opposition parties.

For Umno, the introduction of new faces has been made easier because many incumbents were defeated in the last general election in 1999.

This is the case in Kelantan and Terengganu where Umno was almost completely wiped out. It won a solitary parliamentary seat and two state seats in Kelantan and four state seats in Terengganu.

With a new line-up and the promise of

change, the chances of the BN making a difference in Kelantan is much better than in the last few general elections. At the very least, it stands a better chance of winning more seats at the federal and state levels.

The BN's chances of recapturing Terengganu are better than fair, given the overhaul of the state Umno leadership and the fielding of new candidates for parliamentary and state seats.

Apart from the Anwar issue, Terengganu Umno suffered greatly from the rejection of its veteran leader and Menteri Besar, Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad, who was himself voted out.

Weeks or even months before the election, there were rumblings in the state that the voters, including Umno supporters, were out to teach Wan Mokhtar a lesson (*nak ajar Wan Mokhtar*). His was the classic case of a political leader who overstayed his welcome. He was Menteri Besar for 25 years.

Pas is vulnerable. In the last general election, it won by only a few hundred votes in most of the state constituencies. With Wan Mokhtar gone and the new Terengganu Umno leadership refreshed, the BN has

more than a fighting chance of recapturing the state.

## DIFFICULT TO KEEP EVERYONE HAPPY

**STILL**, there is bound to be dissatisfaction among those who have been dropped or who have not been selected to contest. Many had marched to Abdullah's residence to protest, while others had withdrawn to the sidelines to nurse their disappointment.

As a reminder, when Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad held his first election in 1982, he dropped 45% of the incumbents.

Every leader has to make this difficult choice. But it is to Abdullah's credit that he has been able to come up with a fair selection of novice and experienced candidates from a wide spectrum of life, professions and educational background.

Of course, Abdullah will be the last person to claim that it is a perfect line-up. This is the challenge of keeping a coalition party as large and diversified as the BN going.

Even in Umno, with his power to pick and choose, Abdullah is limited by the pool of potential candidates at his disposal and

by the need to satisfy local demands.

Thus, it would appear that while he has made drastic changes in some states, he has maintained the status quo in others. Being more inclined towards consensus, Abdullah's choice of the candidates is a mixture of his own as well as that of the various state liaison chiefs and leaders of BN component parties.

In the case of non-Umno candidates, Abdullah is naturally dependant on the heads of the respective component parties, some of whom are astute operators and power brokers – the likes of Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, the head of Sarawak BN, Datuk Seri S Samy Vellu of the MIC and Datuk Seri Lim Keng Yaik of Gerakan.

Here, a dose of history doesn't do any harm. On the contrary, it may prove to be useful. History is seldom wrong.

For a start, there is bound to be dissatisfaction and disappointment among many aspirants and their supporters. There may even be some hotheads who will not hesitate to throw party banners, posters and flags into the river.

But should they think of doing such a thing, they are well advised to be mindful of Abdullah's warning to them not to betray the party.

As Prime Minister and party chief, Abdullah has more than mere words to prove his resolve to act against saboteurs and turncoats. He can use the party platform to act against such people. Or if there is a strong basis, he can call on the relevant law enforcement agencies to look into their conduct.

### KEEPING IT UNDER WRAPS

**BUT THE BN** is not alone in facing internal squabbles and challenges. There have been some high-profile defections from Keadilan and DAP.

There are even rumblings in Pas about the inclusion of non-Pas types in the list of candidates – the likes of former diplomats, retired military officers and professionals who are seen as taking advantage of the rising popularity of the party to further their personal agenda.

These are people who have an axe to grind with the government and who only recently joined the party. What Pas has done more successfully than other politi-

cal parties is to manage the dissatisfaction.

Ironically, this has a lot to do with the very thing that Pas is complaining about – the favouring of the BN by the mainstream media.

While they tend to concentrate on reporting the activities of BN parties, including the turmoil that has hit BN component parties, they largely ignore the goings-on in the opposition parties. Thus, Pas has been able to keep its internal problems largely under wraps.

It is not, therefore, surprising that most people have forgotten that the last major crisis to affect Pas took place in 1977. It led to the sacking of the Kelantan State Government and the declaration of a state of emergency.

It happened at the time when Pas was a member of the BN and, understandably, received considerable media coverage. It was also the time when the party had a large war chest in the form of timber concessions and public works contracts.

According to Gordon P Means in his 1991 book entitled *Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation*, the most contentious issues that led to the crisis involved land policy, since land was a state matter and the basis for a major proportion of state revenue. He said over time, certain politicians were alleged to have profited from arranging lucrative timber and mineral concessions with various corporate interests outside the state.

The then-Pas Menteri Besar, Mohamed Nasir, decided to freeze logging land concessions, alleging corrupt practice by the State Economic Development Corporation and the Agricultural Development Board.

In reaction, 20 Pas assemblymen accused Mohamed Nasir of failing to protect party interests and called for his resignation. He refused and was backed by Umno and MCA members of the state assembly.

The struggle escalated into a massive demonstration in Kota Baru. After a series of mediations by federal leaders failed, an emergency was declared in November and Pas was sacked from the BN.

The emergency lasted three months and when the state election was called in March the following year, Pas was defeated by the coalition of the BN and Berjasa. It won only two of the 36 seats.

But Kelantan was lost again to Pas in

1990 when disgruntled elements of Umno, led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, formed an alliance with Pas to fight the BN.

### ENTER A NEW BREED OF BUMIPUTERA BUSINESSMEN

**WITH** the stage being set to regenerate the political leadership, the Prime Minister will almost certainly want to see a similar process taking place in other fields of endeavour.

The improvement in political leadership would go an extra mile if similar improvements occur in the civil service, the corporate world and in such critical areas as education, law and order, defence and the economy.

Here, a distinction has to be made between the economy and commerce. In recent years, there has been a tendency to confuse the economy with commerce. Thus, the success of the corporate sector has been taken to mean the success of the economy as a whole.

While the success of the corporate sector is a reflection of the steady performance of the economy, it takes a lot more than a booming stock market to ensure equitable economic growth and wealth distribution. The greater challenge is to create wealth and distribute it more equitably.

Still, the strong recovery of the corporate sector in the aftermath of the 1997 regional economic crisis is helpful, given the likelihood of the government not spending as much in the coming years to stimulate the economy.

The robust corporate sector can help offset any decline in public sector spending and, once again, act as the economy's engine of growth. This will also allow the government to continue with its efforts to channel the more limited funds to priority sectors.

This is in tandem with Abdullah's recent assurance that the privatisation policy will continue to be implemented.

Also, the fear that the Bumiputera corporate sector has been done in for good by the crisis has turned out to be misplaced. The collapse of two high-profile Bumiputera-controlled groups, namely, the UEM-Renong conglomerate and the Naluri Group, was not systemic.

Many Bumiputera corporate entities not

only survived the crisis, but also emerged stronger. The widespread negative media reporting, which, among other things led to the resounding condemnation of the failed entities, has not dampened the enthusiasm of the Bumiputera corporate community.

On the contrary, the crisis has given birth to a new group of Bumiputera corporate players, some of whom have become giants in their own right.

The number of Bumiputera businessmen and entities that survived the crash far outnumber those who failed. In fact, thanks to the aggressive rebuilding of the economy in the post-1997 crisis through the various stimulus packages and the launching of several large infrastructure projects, a new breed of Bumiputera businessmen has emerged.

## PLAYING CATCH-UP

**FOR** four successive years from 2001 when this magazine started the annual compilation of the richest Malaysians based on the value of their shares on the Malaysian bourse, the number of Bumiputeras who made the list has been steadily growing.

In the 2001 list, only three out of the 20 richest Malaysians were Bumiputeras. In 2002, 10 out of the 40 richest corporate Malaysians were Bumiputeras. Their strength fell to eight in 2003, but is up again to 13 this year.

Ironically, while the non-Bumiputera corporate giants are either pleased with their inclusion in the list or at the very least indifferent, many Bumiputera business captains are either displeased or embarrassed at being included.

Some were in pain trying to discourage us from publishing their names. Maybe it would be good for the Bumiputeras to learn to cope with success.

They cannot, on the one hand, complain when the non-Bumiputeras monopolise the country's corporate wealth and on the other cast all kinds of aspersions when the Bumiputeras are successful in the corporate world.

They are quick to make allegations that the government is not doing enough for Bumiputeras. They condemn failed businessmen for bringing them shame, but are equally unhappy when Bumiputera businessmen succeed.

I think the Bumiputeras, in particular the

Malays, must be more positive in their thinking. They cannot, on the one hand, envy the success of the non-Bumiputeras and on the other suspect the success of their own kind.

Ironically, when they want donations, sponsorship and well-paid jobs they shamelessly seek out and pursue the successful Bumiputera businessmen.

Actually, the Malays being Muslims should not have any difficulty in accepting the fact that trade and commerce are among the most preferred economic activities. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a trader before he became the messenger of God.

In any case, the combined wealth of the 13 Bumiputeras on our list this year is just over half of that of Roberk Kuok, the king of the list, and still way below that of T Ananda Krishnan. The combined wealth of the 13 amounted to RM8.7 billion against Kuok's RM14.19 billion and Ananda's RM12.87 billion. **mb**

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