

# In a frenzy over Dr M's polls riddle

MINUTES after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad ended his address in Muar on Thursday, a retired politician remarked that the highways were going to become cramped from now.

"Take my advice. If you are flying during the weekends, you had better book your tickets a week in advance because the politicians are starting to travel.

"And if you are driving, you'd better fill up your tank before going onto the highway. In 1990, we had bad experiences because petrol kiosks along the highway ran out as there were too many Umno cars refuelling everyday."

Another division leader aspiring to become a candidate was seen calling his family over the hand-phone to say that he would have to remain in Johor for two more days because of urgent matters.

A two-term Assemblyman said he had to switch off his carphone because everybody was asking him about the Prime Minister's reference to the general election.

At the Dewan Jubli Intan hall in Muar, excitement was on everybody's face when Dr Mahathir finally broke his silence on the general election.

Addressing over 5,000 Barisan Nasional supporters, the Prime Minister directed component parties to put their machinery into high gear for the elections.

Several party members were seen drawing out their note books when Dr Mahathir said the election could be held anytime and the party should be prepared.

However, when Dr Mahathir concluded his address without giving a further hint of the election timing, several politicians approached reporters to ask the Prime Minister for more indications.

"Just ask him when the timing is right and if he wants the 300,000 Umno members who are non-voters to be registered first. That will be enough," one senior politician told a reporter.

The 20-minute press conference which followed was dominated by only one issue — the general election — as newsmen tried to get an indication of the possible date.

Dr Mahathir, however, did not commit himself and only said that the timing was right for the Barisan to hold an election which could be near or a long way off.

In the end, political pundits con-

cluded that the election was at least three months to a year away. This they based on what they termed as "indicators" from the party president.

The reasoning varied from one politician to another and seemed to have caused more speculation instead of clearing the air because of different interpretations of what Dr Mahathir had said.

The Umno assemblyman who had "tipped" a reporter to ask the Prime Minister about non-voters in Umno felt that the election would be at the end of the year because of Dr Mahathir's reply. He had appealed to members who were non-voters to register themselves as soon as possible, saying he was disappointed that so many had yet to register.

"Since the PM also asked how many such non-voters there were in MCA and other Barisan parties, he is likely to wait until these people are registered as voters," said the Assemblyman.

"I think the PM is clearly referring to the Election Commission's voter registration exercise scheduled next month.

"The commission will need two to three months to update its electoral rolls after the exercise. So, we can expect an election only at the end of the year," he added.

An MCA leader agreed, saying the commission had stated that it would use the 1993 electoral register if the election was held now.

An Umno division leader, however, felt that Dr Mahathir would only call for elections in five to six months, based on precedents.

"In 1990, we were told to gear up some nine months before the election was held. In 1986, the call was about five months earlier.

"Since the Prime Minister said the election could be near or a long way, he is talking about a few months at least," added the division leader.

A politician who listened in on the press conference said Dr Ma-

hathir had hinted that he wanted to go closer towards a full term this time. He reckoned that the elections would be next year.

"When the Prime Minister brings up a matter, he is seriously thinking about it. When he tells you that Barisan cannot hold elections whenever it feels it will win, he is putting the message through.

"The PM also said the elections could be near or a long way off. So, it must be next year which is considered near if you are gearing party machinery, and far if you are aspiring to be a candidate," added the politician.

The stock market appears to have interpreted the Prime Minister's remarks as a direct indication of soon-to-be-held elections, and Friday's market was bullish. Share brokers have put the word on the street that the elections would be held within three months.

As for aspiring candidates, most of them were already missing from their offices in Kuala Lumpur and other urban centres hours after the Prime Minister's address.

A veteran politician said everyone appeared to have *balik kawa* to lobby and work hard.

He said: "Mentris Besar and ministers are going to have a hard time. You can expect long queues from aspiring candidates all over the country who will be there to pledge support and lobby for seats.

"The customary *kampung kenduri* should start in a week or two."