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Mahathir-Sabah (Roundup)

PM'S VISIT ENDS, BUT ELECTION SPECULATION GOES ON

KOTA KINABALU, Nov 28 (Bernama) -- Talk of an impending state election in Sabah remains just as intense although Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's two-day visit to the state ended today without any announcement on the poll dates.

However, the Prime Minister took the opportunity to drive home a message to the people of Sabah -- continue to support the Barisan Nasional (BN).

To Dr Mahathir, who is BN Chairman, what was at stake stretched beyond the fate of the BN government in Sabah because the state election would have a bearing on the BN's future as a whole, especially when viewed in the context of the current economic and political problems in the country.

The Sabah state election, which must be called by March next year, will be the first to be held since the country was hit by the economic downturn in July last year.

"As soon as is possible, we cannot hold it later than a certain date. We cannot wait until April, that's for sure," Dr Mahathir said when asked about the election dates.

The coming state election, the ninth since Sabah gained independence in 1963, is expected to be one of the most closely contested in its history as there are two opposition parties that are equally vocal in their criticisms of the ruling BN.

In the last Sabah election in February 1994, Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) won 25 seats to BN's 23, but the former lost its majority in the State Assembly a month later when many of its assemblymen defected to BN.

Political analysts said the coming election would be a test of the Sabah people's acceptance of the BN as a champion of the well-being of the various races in the state.

It would also be a major challenge for the opposition, especially PBS which would be keen to gauge its popularity after having lost its majority in the State Assembly.

With the Parti Bersekutu led by former Chief Minister Datuk Harris Salleh joining the fray, the polls would also indicate whether the people are comfortable with veteran politicians making a fresh bid for power.

Unlike his previous visit last August, the Prime Minister this time around openly spoke on the election by urging the people to continue to give their mandate to the BN to ensure continuity in development.

He also told BN parties in Sabah to give priority to BN's interests and to support candidates from any component parties.

"When we win and form the government, then we can enjoy a lot of prosperity and benefits," he said.

While PAS is using the expulsion of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to try and undermine BN's support in the peninsula, opposition parties in Sabah are expected to focus on economic issues in their attempt to garner votes.

However, the Prime Minister remains confident that whatever issues they raise will not affect BN's chances to be returned to power.

-- BERNAMA

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