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Dr M: BN will retain control of Sabah

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KOTA KINABALU, Sat. - Acknowledging that the impending Sabah State elections would be the first test of support for the Government's drastic economic and political measures, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the Barisan Nasional was confident of retaining control of the State administration.

At a Press conference at the Kota Kinabalu International Airport before returning to Kuala Lumpur after a two-day working visit to Sabah, the Prime Minister said he had discovered that unity and co-operation among BN component parties had increased since his last visit to Sabah in August.

"Each of them seems to be excited about facing the elections. This is a good sign for the Sabah BN," he said.

However, Dr Mahathir said although the State elections would be a barometer for the future of the BN, it could not be taken as a complete measurement.

He said it would be the first test for the BN after the drastic political and economic measures taken by the Government and Umno two months ago.

The Government has introduced several measures to revive the country's economy, which include, among others, the exchange rate control which renders the ringgit valueless outside of Malaysia.

Former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was also removed from the Cabinet on Sept 2 and expelled from Umno the following day.

He is facing five charges of corrupt practices and five of sodomy.

Asked how confident the BN was about winning majority seats in the next State elections, Dr Mahathir said:

"We are very confident now especially because of the high spirits shown by BN supporters."

Yesterday, when speaking at a gathering of BN Youth members, Dr Mahathir said the people of Sabah must ensure a BN victory because the results would serve as a barometer for the future of the coalition Government.

He said the BN must win the next polls to ensure that it could continue with development efforts and to return the wealth siphoned off by the previous Parti Bersatu Sabah Government.

The State elections will have to be held within the next 112 days. The mandate of the current State Assembly expires on March 18.

Today, Dr Mahathir said the Datuk Harris Salleh-led Parti Barisan Rakyat Sabah Bersekutu used money to gain popularity in Sabah.

"In the past, Berjaya paid dividends using borrowed money. When they lost, the Government had to bear the burden (of repayment).

"Now Bersekutu is promising to give money to the people. They hope that if we say this will not be possible, we will be unpopular. We don't make such promises."

He said Bersekutu was making such promises because it knew that it would not be able to win and therefore need not fulfil them.

Dr Mahathir said he had reasons to believe that Bersekutu's presence was not to secure a victory but to ensure that the BN was defeated in the elections.

He said some of the votes which were supposed to go to the BN, might go to Bersekutu and this would help PBS.

On when the State elections will be held, Dr Mahathir said: "As early as possible because we cannot go beyond April anyway."

Asked whether there was a possibility that the State elections would be held simultaneously with a general election in view of the current economic situation, Dr Mahathir said:

"Well, yes and no. We have to consider these things."

On the request by the Sabah Government for a RM176 million additional allocation for development projects, Dr Mahathir said: "Yes, we are going to give something. I don't know the amount, but we will give."

On Bersekutu's challenge to the State Government to table a motion in Parliament to get Labuan back under the control of the State administration, Dr Mahathir said:

"They just want to create an issue. Harris is the one who gave Labuan (to the Federal Government). Why is he saying this now? Why did he give it in the first place?"

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