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PM's visit to Sabah fuels speculation on election announcement

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THE people of Sabah await with enthusiasm the arrival of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Kota Kinabalu today.

They are particularly enthusiastic because of speculation that the dissolution of the Barisan Nasional-dominated State Legislative Assembly will be sooner than expected.

A State election must be held by March next year, when the five-year mandate of the current State Assembly expires.

The members of the Assembly were elected in February 1994.

Their term expires in 113 days' time.

Although Chief Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok had said that this was a routine visit by the Prime Minister, political pundits argue that it will indicate when the election will actually be held.

Dr Mahathir will hold a closed-door meeting with Dompok and all Cabinet ministers at Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Resort today.

He will also be meeting heads of the various religious bodies in Sabah.

Later in the afternoon, Dr Mahathir will launch the Sabah BN Youth election machinery at the Likas Sports Complex indoor stadium.

The launch will be attended by Federal and State BN and youth leaders of Sabah component parties. Tonight Dr Mahathir will attend a dinner with the people.

Dr Mahathir is scheduled to hold a closed-door meeting with Sabah Umno liaison committee, adding fuel to speculation that election is around the corner.

Under the State Constitution, Dompok as the Chief Minister has to advise Yang di-Pertua Negeri Tun Sakaran Dandai on the date of the dissolution of the Assembly.

Assembly Speaker Datuk Hassan Alban Sandukung will then have to inform the Election Commission of the dissolution. Election will have to be held within 60 days.

"Should the Assembly be dissolved within the next few days, the people will go to the polls before the fasting month begins next month," a former State minister says.

Dompok, who is State BN chairman, says the BN machinery is in place.

"BN does not take the Opposition as a force to be feared in the State elections," he adds.

On whether the State elections would be on the agenda in the meeting with the Prime Minister, Dompok says:

"If we (BN) consider it important to discuss it now, then I think we should."

Umno with 21 members in the 48-elected-member assembly is the backbone of the State Government. Members in the other parties comprise Parti Demokratik Sabah (11), Sabah Progressive Party (five), Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat Bersatu (three), Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (two), MCA (one) and one Independent.

The opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah has four members. The assembly also has six nominated assemblymen.

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