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Election-Decide

D-DAY FOR MALAYSIANS AS POLLS EXCITEMENT HOTS UP

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 28 (Bernama) -- After nine days of gruelling campaign, the fate of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition and the opposition front now lies in the hands of almost half of Malaysia's population who will decide tomorrow their government to take the country into new century.

Some 17,000 polling stations will open by 8 am in mainland Malaysia and half an hour earlier in the states of Sabah and Sarawak and all indications point to a higher turnout of voters this time among the 9.6 million electorate, fired up by the battle-lines drawn between the BN and the opposition.

The BN, in power throughout the 42 years of the country's independence, campaigned on the feel-good agenda of continuity and unity on the back of a strong economic recovery and telling Malaysians not to gamble their future by voting an untested opposition with contrasting policies.

But for the first time in the nation's history, the opposition parties have managed to bury their differences under an electoral pact, calling themselves Barisan Alternatif, culminating in a one-to-one fight with the BN in most of the 192 parliamentary seats up for grabs. The BN won one seat uncontested on nomination day on Nov 20.

The opposition front, on the other hand, has been wooing the people to vote for change, and with some factions among them basking in their own confidence that this is their best chance ever to come to power on their own accord.

The 10th general election has produced a media blitz the like of which was unseen before, with the BN going on the offensive with a daily bombardment in the mainstream newspapers and television, mainly to ridicule the opposition policies and their leaders.

The opposition, not to be outdone and outwitted, retaliated mainly through flyers and Harakah, the mass-circulation party newspaper of Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pas), whose sales hit an all-time high.

Harakah Editor Zulkifli Sulong was quoted as saying that the twice-weekly newspaper's circulation reached 340,000 during the campaign period, making it the largest among all newspapers in the country.

And what is equally interesting is the campaign going on via the Internet, being used to the maximum to get the message across, especially by the opposition Parti Keadilan Nasional which has parked itself on cyber-space long before the election was called with dozens on websites in support of sacked deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Anwar, the opposition front's candidate for prime minister if it wins the election, did not contest as he is serving a six-year jail sentence for abuse of power, but he has managed to send from behind bars widely-distributed hand-written appeals to voters to end the BN's grip on power.

This election is also getting massive coverage from the international media, with virtually all agreeing with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's prediction of the BN retaining a two-thirds majority in parliament.

During the campaign, the international media, especially the television networks, have been focusing on Anwar's wife, Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail, who is picking up her husband's struggle by standing as candidate in the Permatang Pau constituency in Northern Malaysia, the seat Anwar won

in four previous elections.

Given the expected sympathy votes for Anwar, the battle here is a close call, so much so that Dr Mahathir had to campaign in the constituency yesterday in a last-minute bid to tip the scale for the BN candidate, Anwar's childhood friend Datuk Dr Ibrahim Saad.

This time around, Dr Mahathir is putting what many see as his most physically punishing campaign in criss-crossing the country, sometimes going to three states in a single day, making countless speeches and shaking hands with thousands.

Leading the BN in his fifth general election in the 18 years he has been premier, he told voters in Permatang Pauh, a Malay heartland, that it was Anwar, whom he sacked on Sept 2 last year, who had brought about his own downfall by being morally unfit.

Claiming that this was done by PAS, he said: "They have shifted some of my voters to other constituencies because they thought that they cannot win here."

Dr Mahathir said the opposition had taken their voters to constituencies which were marginal to win the seats there.

The prime minister said he was concerned with the irregularities in the electoral rolls because one should not depend on such a thing to win the election.

Asked by a foreign journalist whether he could provide evidence to the press, Dr Mahathir said: "We are not bound to supply to you. We will report to the Election Commission when we have the facts but it takes time to report to the commission because the commission does not want people to be playing around."

Later when asked by the same journalist whether the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim issue had damaged his (Dr Mahathir's) popularity, Dr Mahathir said: "I won't answer such a stupid question."

The focus of the election is also on Kelantan, the sole state not ruled by the BN, which this time is waging an all-out battle to wrest the state from Pas.

But Pas has said it is certain not only to retain Kelantan but will pull "some surprises" in Terengganu, the oil-rich state which the party has long cherished to capture without much success.

Pas leaders are confident this is the party's best chance ever to win Terengganu and even perform above-expectation in Kedah and Perlis, all northern states that are virtually the country's Malay belt.

Months before he called the snap election, Dr Mahathir himself had said it would be the dirtiest in the nation's history primarily because of lies and the hate-campaign of the opposition.

Another opposition leader, Lim Kit Siang, a man who seldom agrees with the prime minister on most policy matters, concurs with him today when he also called the campaign the dirtiest ever since independence.

"Shrill incendiary and chilling statements by Dr Mahathir and other leaders of the BN were wantonly aired to send a message of fear and hatred," said the DAP secretary-general in a statement.

But on the eve of polling, New Sunday Times writer Jocelyn Tan perhaps best sums up the mood of the country when she says: "When campaigning ends at midnight today, Malaysians will be more than ready to choose their government for the next five years".

-- BERNAMA

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