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Dr M: Barisan ready for polls (HL)

Rashid Yusof; Marhalim Abas

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today Barisan Nasional is ready to face the impending general election but remained tightlipped on the question on everybody's minds: When?

Dr Mahathir, who is BN chairman, told reporters after chairing the BN supreme council meeting which some thought could produce an indication on the likely dates, that the nationwide polls could be held "anytime".

"Maybe this year, maybe the next, maybe in a month or two, maybe three, four months . . .," he told a Press conference.

Asked whether the BN component parties have been directed to activate their election machinery, Dr Mahathir said: "Yes, they have to prepare from now".

Dr Mahathir added that this was the last BN supreme council meeting before the general election which must be held before next June.

BN secretary-general Datuk Seri Mohamed Rahmat said, at the meeting, Dr Mahathir told the component parties to prepare for the polls.

"The message was for the BN to defend the two-thirds majority," Mohamed told reporters.

At the Press conference, Dr Mahathir also said today's meeting did not discuss the question of candidates or seat allocation with component parties advised to avoid controversies when discussing them.

On the question of candidates, he said as usual being the BN chairman, he would have the final say and all component parties would adhere to it.

To another question, he said the seat allocation would "more or less" be the same as the one used for the last general election.

Dr Mahathir also spoke of the need to put "in the freezer" any differences so that the ruling coalition would face the polls as "a strong and united party".

"Let's freeze these differences until after the general election," he said. He added that this was agreed by all.

At today's meeting, the BN leaders discussed major issues like rural development, traditionally a plus point for BN and hence should be given serious attention.

Dr Mahathir said the improving economy would also be an advantage to the ruling coalition since the economic problems have been overcome.

On the campaigning period, the Prime Minister said a long campaigning period could lead to tension as evident by the six-week period in 1969.

Asked whether the fact that more than 1.35 million new voters would be eligible to vote if the election is held next year would be a factor in deciding the timing of the polls, Dr Mahathir said most of them were BN supporters anyway.

On a newspaper report that it was possible that Pas would drop the Islamic State concept in the manifesto of the opposition alliance as the case with DAP's Malaysian Malaysia, the Prime Minister said:

"I heard that Pas is dropping the Islamic State because it obeys the DAP. We (BN) only listen to the BN."

The meeting also discussed the BN's 25th anniversary celebrations. The BN turned 25 in May. A committee, chaired by Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who is assuming the duties of the Umno deputy president, has been formed. Mohamed Rahmat is the committee's secretary while Tun Daim Zainuddin is the treasurer.

Leaders of all 14 component parties were present today with the

exception of Gerakan's Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik and Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu of MIC who are overseas. Gerakan was represented by deputy president Datuk Kerk Choo Ting, while MIC deputy president Datuk S. Subramaniam represented the party.

Dr Mahathir added that Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Osu Sukam has been made the State BN chief while Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, who is now Information Minister, would remain Pahang BN chief.

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