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Guessing game over, Parliament is dissolved (HL)

Lokman Mansor

DEWAN Rakyat is dissolved today, paving the way for the nation's 10th general elections since Independence. In making the announcement yesterday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad put an end to the guessing game which had gone on almost a year.

He told a packed press conference room at the Prime Minister's Department in Putrajaya that Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah has given his consent to the dissolution of the ninth Parliament.

The Parliament and the Election Commission have been informed, and all states, except Sabah and Sarawak, will dissolve their respective assemblies to pave the way for simultaneous federal and state polls, the Prime Minister added.

Sabah had just held its state elections in March this year while Sarawak is scheduled to go to the polls only next year.

The Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (KLSE) reacted positively to the news, with the KLSE Composite Index closing 13.27 points or 1.9 per cent higher at 728.81. The benchmark indicator in fact touched a high of 741.92 before losing some ground on profit-taking.

Dr Mahathir told the special press conference, which was also attended by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders, that the Election Commission will announce the nomination and polling days. The commission will meet on Friday to fix the dates, its chairman Datuk Omar Hashim said.

Asked why the Government decided to dissolve Parliament now, the Prime Minister said this is to allow elections to be held before the fasting month in December so as to avoid the use of mosques for campaigning and other inappropriate activities which could disrupt the religious obligations of Muslims during Ramadhan.

Asked if the elections will be a test of political power between him and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Dr Mahathir said: "That is a joke. I don't go for elections to test my political power against others. Elections are a serious business. What is important to me is that this country gets a good government."

"I don't seek anything for myself. What is important is what is achieved in this country under the BN Government. This is not personal.

"I just happen to be the leader, but we work as a team. We (in the BN) all cooperate. That is why you see them up here with me," Dr Mahathir said, pointing to the BN leaders standing behind him during the press conference.

He said the list of BN candidates is not yet ready, but acknowledged that there will be some new faces, adding that he will hold discussions with BN component party leaders to finalise the matter.

Election Commission's Omar said the 1998 Electoral Rolls with about 9.7 million voters verified on January 7 this year will be used for the coming elections.

He said 32 political parties, including the newly-registered Malaysian Democratic Party, are expected to field candidates for the 193 parliamentary seats (including one new seat for Mambong, Sarawak) and 394 state seats.

The 14-member BN coalition currently has 166 seats in the Dewan Rakyat, Opposition parties 22 seats and independent candidates three seats. One

seat, Kota Melaka, has been vacant since the incumbent, Mr Lim Guan Eng, received a jail sentence.

The BN, and its predecessor the Alliance, has always commanded at least a two-thirds majority in Parliament.

Asked whether the BN is confident of securing the two-thirds majority again, Dr Mahathir, who is also BN chairman, said: "We are very confident."

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