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650,000 new voters this year

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THE Election Commission (EC) estimates 650,000 new voters will be eligible to vote in 1999, partly following a surge of interest among young Malaysians.

Election Commission chairman, Datuk Omar Mohd Hashim said the commission had expected a "bumper" crowd this year because of more interest in elections recently, especially among young voters.

"For the coming elections, it is projected that there will be some 650,000 new voters for 1999. In 1998, we have about 9.7 million registered voters while in 1994, there were 9 million voters.

"We expected a high percentage. Physically, we saw a lot of young voters coming around to be registered. This is a nice surprise and a record ... the biggest ever. This is good for the country," Omar said.

He said if general elections were held within the next month or so, the EC will use the 1998 electoral roll because Malaysians who registered in the most recent registration campaign which closed on May 13 will still have to undergo a "substantial process."

"The newly compiled data will have to be processed and legalised and it can only be completed at the end of this year or early next year," Omar said.

Omar said the Commission received 1.1 million applications as of May 13 1999, out of which 65 per cent were new voters while the rest requested for a change of division for elections.

He said the commission had sent 5,640 registration forms to 75 Malaysian embassies and missions abroad, and are still receiving replies.

Omar said the EC has allocated RM55 million to conduct the coming general elections.

"This is an increase because the area covered is more, there are additional voters, more voting centres and more staff. In addition, the general cost of things have also gone up," Omar told a press briefing in Kuala Lumpur.

In 1994, the EC was allocated RM42 million.

Asked if the Commission is ready if the elections were to be held before September, Omar said: "We are always in the state of preparedness. Given some time as notice, we have no problems in running the elections, even though with a short campaigning time.

"The Commission needs about three weeks to a month. We are ever-ready from the word 'go'.

When asked if there will be any foreign observers at the coming elections, Omar said: "There will be 20 million local people who will monitor the elections and the commission ... the 20 million rakyat which we are responsible for.

"We have done a good job for the past nine elections, and many many smaller elections. Therefore, we do not see the need for foreign observers unless the Government wants it," he said.

On the problem of phantom voters, Omar said that: "we are a public institution and we are responsible to the public. Therefore, they have the right to question. What is important and what can be done we will do so.

"We are forever trying to correct and improve ourselves either technically or otherwise. This is the best that we have done.

"Comparatively, back in the 1990 elections, it was recorded that we had 300,000 phantom voters. Over the years, we have cleaned up all these.

Since 1990, we have struck out half a million registered voters, including those who have died (360,000) and duplicated records.

"Of course new voters have come in. For last year, we struck out 48,000, including 29,767 who have died and 5,000 are duplicated names. The cleansing process is ongoing," Omar said.

Asked to clarify the deadline for holding the next general elections which must be held every five years, Omar said it was June 7 2000.

"Even though the previous elections were held in April 1994, the date to take is when Parliament convened which was in June 1994. Therefore, consequently the present Government will hold office until June."

It was reported that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said that he was given to understand that he has an extra two months (until July) to hold elections.

Omar added that the challenge for this coming elections, like all elections is to ensure that the commission goes through its duties in all fairness, clean and as transparent in its processes, and to make everybody satisfied with our work and to trust us.

He also said that preparations for the coming elections is already underway. Training of the Commission's staff began in May.

He added that the commission is currently assisted by the National Registry Department in verifying the electoral roll.

"This will be of great help and is operational only from this year ... to ensure that no non-citizen can become a voter," said Omar who was appointed as chairman last month.

Asked if he was appointed because of criticism against former chairman Datuk Harun Din's leadership, Omar said: "We are all appointed and it is in the Constitution and Elections Act 1958. One holds office until the age of 65, then one retires. It has nothing to do with any criticism. When our time comes, we all have to retire."

Datuk Harun Din retired on June 21 1999.

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