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Parliament dissolves today (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Wed. - The Prime Minister today announced that Parliament would be dissolved tomorrow to pave the way for the 10th general election since independence - ending a year of intense speculation.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the Yang di-Pertuan Agong had given his consent to the dissolution.

Speaking at a specially-called Press conference at the Prime Minister's Department here, Dr Mahathir said the Election Commission would announce the nomination and polling dates in due course. (See page 2 for excerpts of Press Conference.)

This is the last general election of the millennium. At the Press conference, Dr Mahathir was flanked by representatives of the BN component parties. Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali was among those present.

For some of his answers to questions posed by journalists, Dr Mahathir received several rounds of applause from those present at the conference. This was a marked difference from previous announcements where the mood was serious and sober.

Reading from a prepared text, the Prime Minister said: "The Government has decided today that the ninth Parliament is dissolved effective Thursday, Nov 11, 1999. This will enable the general election to be held.

"The Yang di-Pertuan Agong has signed the declaration of the dissolution today. The Government has also advised the State Governments to do likewise with their Legislative Assemblies."

Election Commission chairman Datuk Omar Mohd Hashim, meanwhile, said the commission would meet on Friday to decide on the dates. He would announce the dates then.

With the exception of Sabah and Sarawak, all the other State Legislative Assemblies are expected to be dissolved tomorrow. Sabah held its State election early this year while Sarawak had it in September 1996. This means that they still have some time to go before fresh polls must be held.

According to the Federal Constitution, a general election must be held within 60 days of the dissolution of Parliament.

Election regulations stipulate that the earliest nominations can be held is four days after the dissolution of Parliament or a State Assembly, while the earliest polling dates are seven days after nomination.

A total of 9,694,156 Malaysians (1998 electoral rolls) will be eligible to vote in this general election. At stake are 193 parliamentary and 394 State seats.

A breakdown of the parliamentary seats are Perlis (three), Kedah (15), Penang (11), Perak (23), Selangor (17), Negri Sembilan (7), Malacca (five), Johor (20), Pahang (11), Terengganu (eight), Kelantan (14), Sarawak (28), Sabah (20), Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur (10) and Federal Territory of Labuan (one).

Looking cheerful and confident, the Prime Minister took a barrage of questions from the posse of local and foreign journalists.

Asked why he decided to dissolve Parliament now, Dr Mahathir said: "We initially thought that the general election should be held after the Hari Raya (Puasa), but we found that if held then, it means that this will have to be after the fasting month.

"At that time, the Muslims who wish to carry out their religious

obligations - fast, pray, perform the terawih - will be disturbed by certain parties who will try to use mosques, surau and other places of worship to campaign.

"They may use abusive words, slander, cheat and even use profanities. This will not be good.

"Apart from that, we are also worried that certain parties will try to foil the election by holding demonstrations and riots, especially when they find out they cannot win."

Asked whether the Barisan Nasional was confident of getting the two-thirds majority in the polls, Dr Mahathir, who is BN chairman, said: "God willing, we will win more than two-thirds majority.

"If we do not have the confidence, we will not call the elections."

The Prime Minister was also asked by a CNN journalist whether the election would be a test of his popularity against his former deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Replying, he said: "That's a joke. I don't go for election to test my popularity against somebody. We go for election because it is important to determine which party will form the Government.

"I don't care whether I am popular or not. What is important to me is that the country gets a good government."