

14/11/1999

Parties step up a gear (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Political leaders worked late into the night finalising their candidate line-ups, thrashing out last-minute details and election strategies before hitting the campaign trail.

Prime Minister and Barisan Nasional chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad met the Kelantan Umno Liaison Committee here tonight to fine-tune the game plan to wrest the State from Pas.

With the return of Parti Melayu Semangat 46 former president Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah to Umno and his appointment as State liaison committee chairman, political analysts believe the party now has the best chance to regain control of the State which it lost in 1990.

Not to be left out, Alternative Front coalition leaders met behind closed doors for almost the whole day at a hotel here to discuss strategies and "outstanding issues."

The meeting was attended by 100 leaders from Pas, DAP, Keadilan and Parti Rakyat Malaysia. They included all party presidents and deputies, vice-presidents, supreme council members and State liaison committee leaders.

On Monday, the BN's election machinery will move into higher gear with Dr Mahathir meeting component party leaders to finalise the list of candidates.

First to meet Dr Mahathir will be Umno State liaison committee heads who will individually submit their choice of candidates. It is learnt the meetings with the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers will continue until Tuesday.

There are likely to be surprises in the line-up, with talk of interesting moves involving several Menteri Besar and Cabinet Ministers from Umno. Many new faces will also be contesting, the injection of new blood providing fresh impetus towards the party's struggle into the new millennium.

Dr Mahathir will then meet BN component party leaders to complete the list of candidates for the Nov 29 polls. Nomination is fixed for Nov 20.

Consultations with BN parties are expected to continue until Friday, after which Dr Mahathir will leave for Alor Star for Saturday's nomination day.

Dr Mahathir's public engagements for next week have been rescheduled. Tomorrow, Dr Mahathir will address Youth and Wanita members at a gathering at the Putra World Trade Centre on the role they have to play in the election.

Umno Youth acting chief Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein said Dr Mahathir's message was expected to ignite and reaffirm the commitment and motivation of members from both movements in ensuring a sound victory for the Barisan Nasional.

Dr Mahathir had earlier said the allocation of seats among the component parties would not differ much from the last general election. However, there are expected to be some swapping of seats. Hence, it is interesting to see whether PPP will be allotted any seats this time. Its president Datuk M. Kayveas said the party would give its undivided support to BN regardless of whether it would be contesting or not.

At stake in the general election are 193 parliamentary and 394 State seats (excluding Sabah and Sarawak).

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