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Politicians embark on the polls trail

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CAMPAIGNING for the 10th general election officially began yesterday after candidates submitted their papers to contest in a total of 193 parliamentary and 394 State constituencies.

The campaigning will go on until Nov 29, when Malaysians will choose the government they think will best fulfill their aspirations and needs for the next five years.

Political parties had begun putting up their buntings, flags, billboards, posters and advertisements from as early as last week. The tempo will only intensify from now.

And so will the war of words between the two major political camps - the seasoned 14-member Barisan Nasional and the newly-formed Barisan Alternatif of four parties.

Actually both sides have been campaigning long before this because they had expected polls to be held much earlier.

Talk of a snap election surfaced shortly after the Asian economic crisis began at the end of 1997. The argument - largely among business circles - was that the Prime Minister would wish to seek a new mandate given the way the crisis had affected the economy.

The illogic of the argument seems clear now, but at that time many thought it a possibility despite the fact that there was no reason for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to do that.

The landslide mandate of the 1995 general election was sufficient for him to take the country through the crisis. Renewed speculation began after Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was sacked and his supporters took to weekly demonstrations. This was further fuelled by Dr Mahathir's State-by-State tour to explain government policies.

Elections, many thought, would take place when he concluded his tour. Afterall, they said, how many times could the Prime Minister possibly go around the country?

Many parties were actually priming themselves for September polls and when that did not materialise they began betting on November.

BN politicians were disappointed and opposition politicians claimed Dr Mahathir was reluctant to call for elections as he was afraid to face voters.

BN parties, in particular, actually ignited their election machinery thinking Dr Mahathir would announcement polls after returning from his New York trip last September.

But the Prime Minister continued on as though polls were the furthest thing from his mind. However, it is obviously now that he was planning things close to his chest.

Hence, when the moment came, it took everyone by surprise.

The BN side greeted news of the dissolution of Parliament with great delight.

But the opposition parties which had been just as eager for polls to take place, criticised the Prime Minister for calling elections midway through the Budget session.

This time around, they claimed Dr Mahathir was calling the election because he was afraid to face the debate in Parliament And that's politics for you!

Actually, Dr Mahathir has only called a snap election once in his career as Prime Minister.

Shortly after taking over from Tun Hussein Onn in 1981, he sought a new mandate and called an election in 1982, more than a year before the mandate was due to expire.

He took his subsequent mandates well past four years, whereas the 1995 polls was called with only six months more to run. Only two other elections - in 1969 and 1974 - stretched past five years.

But Dr Mahathir has stretched the current mandate the furthest.

The November polls is taking place with only five more months before its expiry in April 2000.

And even if Dr Mahathir had been eluding pundits on the polls date, the two main political camps have been campaigning hard and fast, especially in the last four or five months.

In that sense, the next nine days of campaigning is more an exercise in introducing the actual candidates to the electorate than in hammering at issues.

Never has so much dirty linen been aired by two rival political groups as in the last few months, not even during the highly contentious polls of 1990.

In fact, apart from real and warung politicians, the cafe crowd and other political observers, the average Malaysian is frankly quite tired of the politicking of the last one year.

Malaysians, will enjoy the campaign period, they will vote, and after that, they hope they can once again get on with their lives.