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Reading the bottom line in Monday's polls

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ON Monday, Malaysians will cast their ballots to return their wakil rakyat to the 10th Dewan Rakyat and the State Legislative Assemblies except the State legislature of Sabah and Sarawak.

The dissolution of the Dewan Rakyat on Nov 12 was welcome relief from months of speculation and uncertainty of the date of the general election.

Constitutionally, the Prime Minister has the power to advise the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to dissolve the Dewan Rakyat at any time before the expiry of its five-year term. Indeed, in India recently which has the same system of parliamentary democracy as Malaysia, the Prime Minister has called for three snap polls within a period of three years.

In the present instance, the Prime Minister really had only two options, namely, to call for an election either before Ramadan or wait until after March to enable Muslims who perform the annual haj to return from Mecca to vote.

In the event, the Prime Minister chose November, thus ending the agony of a very long waiting period for an election dictated by the current political and economic implications.

Holding a general election at this time of the year, although unavoidable in the circumstances, puts a strain on the public services and the police because it is the time of the year when these services are geared to deal with monsoon floods and rescue operations of flood victims. Schools which are used as polling stations may have to double up as evacuation centres for flood victims.

November is also the time when the SPM examination is held. Some examinations dates have had to be changed to make way for polling day and the fact that teachers who have to invigilate the examination are also election officials. According to the Elections Commission, 70 per cent of election officials are school teachers.

Perhaps, the most affected by a November poll are the politicians themselves whose ceramah have had to be cancelled or just washed out because of the rain. They are at a clear disadvantage because the campaign period is the time when they persuade the floating electorate to cast the vote in their favour.

The Muslim calendar gains 11 days each year on the Gregorian Calendar, so the instances of Ramadan, Hari Raya Puasa and the haj are variables when determining the best time to hold an election. However, Deepavali in November, Christmas in December and Chinese New Year in January or February are fixed dates. Malaysians are not in the mood to have a election at such a time. Hence, it is a relief that the election is being held now so that they can enjoy their festivals.

Be that as it may, in future the most ideal period to hold an election is between the months of April and August. By then the year's Budget would have been approved by Parliament and the public administration in running order. Apart from usually good weather conditions of the period, it will not disrupt school examinations and other year-end activities.

The law should be changed to provide that following the dissolution of Parliament, the Election Commission shall fix nomination day on a Saturday, not earlier than a week after the issue of the writ of election and that polling day will be on Saturday two weeks after nomination day. Such a law will end the guessing game as to how much time the commission will allow for campaigning. In addition, a Saturday will not disrupt

normal business too much.

It is reported that buses from Kuala Lumpur to the States are fully booked from Friday to Sunday. This shows that Malaysians are keen to exercise their right to vote this time.

Perhaps, the most interesting feature of the present election is that almost three quarters of the seats up for grabs at parliamentary and State levels are straight fights. It follows that the winner can truly claim that he or she represents the majority of the electorate because to win, the winner must obtain more than 50 per cent of the votes cast.

In a parliamentary democracy, the existence of the Opposition is part of the system. The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, acknowledges this fact by his declared aim that the Barisan Nasional must obtain a two-thirds majority in the Dewan Rakyat and not 100 per cent.

In all our previous Parliaments, there has always been an Opposition although its numbers may wax and wane. It has been accorded due recognition and respect in contrast to another country where, sometime ago, the sole Opposition Member of Parliament was hounded down to bankruptcy. Recently, the president of an Opposition party and an MP of that country was not given a permit to make a political speech at the annual dinner of his own political party!

Parliamentary democracy has truly taken root and flowered in Malaysia. It took the British Parliament 400 years to evolve to what it is today. We have done it in 40 years.

The polls on Monday will be further proof of the people's commitment to the system.

The bottom line, however, is that the people will get the Government they deserve.

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