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The ballot box should resolve the air of political unsettlement

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad looked remarkably relaxed and upbeat for someone about to launch into what promises to be one of the most challenging and exciting general elections for Malaysians.

Dressed in a light grey suit and brightly patterned tie, the Prime Minister smiled and bantered his way through a packed news conference in Putrajaya called to announce that Parliament would be dissolved for the 10th general election.

The Yang di-Pertuan Agong had given his consent for the dissolution of Parliament earlier in the morning.

After that, Dr Mahathir chaired his last Cabinet meeting for this term. He met Menteris Besar and Chief Ministers about noon, followed by a meeting with Barisan Nasional component heads, before facing the Press.

With the announcement, months of waiting, speculation and false alarms have come to an end.

There had been so many false alarms about the date of the election that some could hardly believe the general election was finally going to be called.

Umno politicians had been told at the supreme council meeting two Thursdays ago to "be prepared", and that it could be in a matter of days or weeks.

But it was the sending out of telegrams to all the Menteris Besar and Chief Ministers on Tuesday that eventually pressed upon BN politicians that this one could be for real.

(Telegrams from the Prime Minister's office are an indication of great urgency, according to a Ministerial aide.

(The last time he remembers telegrams being sent out for a meeting at short notice was when Kedah Assemblymen were summoned to Kuala Lumpur over the Menteri Besar issue).

The relief was probably felt most keenly by the political parties, whether in the BN or the Barisan Alternatif, for both sides have been preparing and campaigning for months.

Or as think-tank head Razak Baginda puts it, "The country has been in election mood for too long. "One way or another, I see the election as a means of resolving the air of unsettlement around us, to settle the issue of mandate once and for all."

It does not need much elaboration to know that a large part of this "air of unsettlement" has to do with the sacking and trial of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and the way the opposition parties have rallied together around him, and with him as their crusading symbol for political change.

The ruling coalition - the BN, and prior to that, the Alliance - has been in power since Merdeka. And there is no denying that the Barisan Alternatif is the biggest electoral challenge to be faced by the BN since the 1990 election.

The Opposition has never been this organised or determined to make a charge for power and there has been no shortage of issues to fuel it on.

On top of that, the BN has set itself a tough act to follow as in the 1995 election it swept 162 of the 192 seats in Parliament, garnering a record 65 per cent of the popular vote. That was its best mandate ever.

Yet, Dr Mahathir, for whom this will be the fifth election as Prime Minister, could not have looked more ebullient and confident as at the Press conference yesterday.

It may have to do with the knowledge that the bulk of the Malaysian electorate is still very much attached to the idea of peace and stability, continuity and reliability, moderation and tolerance.

Malaysians do sympathise with what has happened to Anwar but at the same time, many of them are not quite ready to wipe from the slate all that the Government has done for them, especially in the last 20 years.

And this is particularly clear when contrasted with the socio-economic-political events in neighbouring countries the last year or so.

And while Dr Mahathir may be villified by the opposition parties, a large number of Malaysians cannot help but see him as the leader who gave Malaysians a more prosperous way of life, who led Malaysia into the modern technological age, who put Malaysia on the global map and who gave Malaysians an international identity.

In many ways, this general election will continue to revolve around the personality of Dr Mahathir just as the 1995 polls had seen a swing to the BN on the strength of his daring and visionary leadership.

Events of the next few weeks will involve ordinary Malaysians in as much as they will be the direct participants of the polls. Many have already made up their minds about the sort of government to take them into the new millennium, others will decide as the campaign unfolds.

The political mandate lies in their hands.

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