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One-day cooling-off period before polls proposed

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - The Election Commission will consider introducing a one-day "cooling-off" period before polling day for any election or by-election.

Its chairman Datuk Omar Hashim said during this cooling-off period, no campaigning would be allowed, while only commission workers, the police, those with prior authorisation and voters would be allowed at polling stations on polling day.

He said this would mean that if a by-election was to be held on Thursday, all campaigning would cease at midnight on Tuesday. Under present election laws, campaigning has to stop at midnight on Wednesday. He said this was necessary following certain incidents highlighted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the April 1 by-election in Sanggang, Pahang.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Umno president, said after the party's supreme council meeting yesterday that the Opposition had violated several election regulations, especially on campaigning.

He said the Opposition had campaigned way past midnight with flags on their vehicles and so on.

Dr Mahathir had also said the Cabinet would discuss ways to better enforce election laws to ensure supporters of political parties stick strictly to procedures, particularly those pertaining to campaigning.

He said the proposal would be presented to the Cabinet and if endorsed, submitted to the commission.

Omar said the commission welcomed any proposals, especially from political parties, on how elections should be conducted and carried out more smoothly and effectively, with importance placed on voter safety.

He said the incident in Sanggang greatly upset the voters with many openly expressing their fears to go out and cast their votes.

"Though the voter turnout was encouraging with 76.28 per cent, we feel it could have even achieved 100 per cent had many of the voters not been afraid to come out."

He said the idea of a cooling-off period stemmed from observations by commission officers who were in Indonesia during its general election last year.

In Indonesia, a two-day cooling-off period was part of its electoral process which had proven effective in maintaining smooth and effective elections.

"However, we feel a one-day cooling-off period would suffice in Malaysia."

He said even commission officers felt harassed on polling day in Sanggang and it was understandable why some voters feared for their safety.

If everyone had stuck to stipulated laws, there would not have been much fear and tension on April 1.

However, Omar said the commission had not received any reports on the alleged incidents.

The commission will submit the cooling-off period proposal along with others to its technical committee for consideration.

The committee will also seek the approval of all political parties.

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