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Sarawak sets the wheels moving in anticipation of early election

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ANTICIPATING an early election, the Election Commission has placed its machinery on stand-by, to conduct the election even if the Sarawak State Assembly is dissolved tomorrow.

The term of the present assembly, which was elected on Sept 8-9, 1996, will only end next September, but going by the activities of political parties in the State now election could be around the corner.

"But the final whistle (dissolution of the assembly) will have to come from the Chief Minister (Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud)," said a political party veteran.

In accordance with the State Constitution, the Chief Minister must seek the consent of the Yang di-Pertua Negeri to dissolve the 62-member State Assembly.

And in the spirit of Barisan Nasional, the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad shall also be informed before announcement of the dissolution is made.

Taib being the State BN chairman had recently hinted that the present State Government would be seeking a fresh mandate from the people before completing the five-year term in office.

He told the Press that if the election could not be called this year, it would be held early next year.

During a gathering of BN component party leaders in Miri in August, the Chief Minister had also indicated that election was 'nigh'. Since then Taib and other BN leaders had been holding series of meetings with community leaders in the State.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had also announced that the political scenario was conducive for the State election to be held.

State EC officer Wan Alwi Tuanku Hashim said his office was prepared for the State election.

He said returning officers and supporting staff for the election had been identified. Even the nomination centres, tallying centres, counting and polling centres had been identified.

Identified, too, are the modes of land, river and air transportation. In order to hold the election smoothly, the Commission would require a large number of vehicles, boats and helicopters.

Such a state of preparedness of the Commission to conduct an early State election is expected as it had in November, last year, conducted the parliamentary election which involved 28 constituencies in Sarawak.

Sarawak and Sabah are the only States in Malaysia whose State elections are not held with the parliamentary election.

In the 1999 parliamentary election, Sarawak BN comprising Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) and Sarawak National Party (SNAP) scored a landslide victory winning all the 28 seats.

If the parliamentary election could be used as a yardstick for BN going into the State election, it will be an 'easy victory' for the Taib-led State Government to be returned to power.

In 1996 State election, the State BN almost made a clean sweep of the 62 seats contested. The BN won 57, the DAP won two while independent candidates won the remaining two seats.

However, the BN increased its seats to 58 when Wong Sing Ai of DAP who

was elected Assemblyman for Kidurong had his victory declared null and void by the High Court.

BN's Michael Sim who was defeated by Wong filed and won an election petition. When a by-election was held, Sim turned the tables on Wong to win the seat in a straight fight.

Expected to join the fray in the impending State election are Sarawak-based Star and Peninsula-based DAP, Keadilan and Pas.

Unlike the 1996 election, the coming election will be a one-day affair, like the parliamentary election last year.

"I believe we have no problem in holding the election in a day because we have the experience and means," Wan Alwi said.

When the election can be a one-day affair, polling will no longer need to be held during school term holidays as was the case in previous elections. The Commission is at liberty to hold polling day during weekend.

The Commission was expected to use the new electoral roll to be certified later this month but if that is not possible the roll certified on Feb 24, this year containing 816,952 registered voters will be used for the election. A total of 814,347 registered voters were eligible to vote in the 1996 election.

At the outset, Sarawak being a multi-racial population, no single race could form the State Government. It has been proven and the people now know what they wanted - a strong Government.

The people want a strong State Government that can maintain unity and political stability, not one that sows extremism and hatred among the people.

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