

21 MAR 2004

Election-Polling

MALAYSIANS GO TO THE POLLS WITH BN EXPECTING STRONG MANDATE

KUALA LUMPUR, March 21 (Bernama) -- Malaysians go to the polls today in the country's 11th general election with the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) expecting a huge mandate from the people for the new leadership of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The 14-member coalition has asked the 10.28 million voters out of a population of 23 million to provide Abdullah, who assumed office four months ago, with a solid, five-year term as an endorsement for his people-centred policies and programmes.

Some 7,300 polling centres mainly in schools and community halls will open from 8am to 5pm for the voters to cast their votes.

A total of 202 parliamentary and 493 state seats are up for grabs, mostly one-on-one contests between BN and the main opposition parties -- PAS, DAP and Keadilan.

The BN got off to a rousing start on nomination day last Saturday, winning 14 parliamentary and seven state seats uncontested.

It bagged another three parliamentary and four state seats when opposing candidates backed out within the subsequent three-day cooling period.

PAS sprang a surprise when it captured a state seat in Johor on nomination day uncontested, blocking another possible BN clean sweep in the birth state of Umno, which forms the backbone of BN.

The coalition has been in power since Independence in 1957, first under the Perikatan banner before expanding to become a national front to include members from Sabah and Sarawak.

Abdullah, who is leading the BN for the first time in a general election after taking over from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has appealed to voters to come out in full force to cast their ballots in the first general election in the new millennium.

Weather is expected to be fair throughout the country in the morning while Sabah and Sarawak could experience isolated showers in the afternoon.

With polling day coinciding with the Formula One Malaysian Grand Prix, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Chan Kong Choy has advised those going for the race in Sepang to vote early before heading for the circuit.

Although needing merely another 93 seats for a simple majority in Parliament, analysts have predicted a thumping victory for the BN to possibly control 80 per cent of the 219-seat Dewan Rakyat.

However, Abdullah has warned party workers against being complacent with the early no-contest victories, showing the way by leading BN campaigns in his home-state Penang and neighbouring Kedah and Perak.

In a final push to the BN's determined bid to wrest back Terengganu and Kelantan from PAS, Abdullah has stepped-up the BN's campaign in the two East Coast states by meeting the people in the last two days before polling.

The eight-day campaigning period ended at the stroke of midnight yesterday.

In the last 10th Parliament dissolved on March 4, the BN had 152 seats, PAS 26, DAP 10 and Keadilan 5.

The Election Commission hoped to achieve 90 per cent turnout as compared to between 70 and 75 per cent in the last election.

It said the electoral roll had been cleaned up and the names of voters who had died have been taken out.

About 200,000 votes will be cast via post comprising 113,000 from the armed forces, 83,000 from the police and 2,500 diplomats and students overseas.

The EC expects to get the first result by 7.30pm and some state governments may even be formed by 10pm.

Some 56,000 policemen, including 8,000 reserves, will be deployed nationwide to maintain peace and order.

Abdullah is being challenged by Abdul Khalid Rasid of PAS in Kepala Batas, which he has represented since 1978.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak is up against another PAS hopeful, Brig Jen (Rtd) Datuk Zakaria Dahlan, in Pekan while MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting faces DAP's Tan Hang Meng in the new constituency of Tanjung Piai in Johor.

MIC president Datuk Seri S.Samy Vellu is defending his Sungai Siput seat in a three-cornered fight against S.Ponmugam of DAP and Dr D.Jeyakumar of Keadilan.

Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik is being challenged by DAP's Nga Hock Cheh in his bid to retain the Bruas seat in Perak.

On the opposition front, PAS president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang is engaged in a repeat clash with BN's Datuk Abdul Rahman Bakar to defend his Marang parliamentary seat.

DAP chairman Lim Kit Siang is trying to make a parliamentary comeback by challenging incumbent Thong Fah Chong of BN in Ipoh Timor.

Keadilan president Datin Seri Wan Azizah Ismail is being challenged by former chief imam of Masjid Negara Datuk Pirdaus Ismail, the BN flagbearer in Permatang Pauh.

-- BERNAMA

AZZ AZZ RM EMK