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Election-Dissolution (Wrapup)

PARLIAMENT TO BE DISSOLVED TOMORROW, ELECTION DATE KNOWN IN FOUR DAYS

KUALA LUMPUR, March 3 (Bernama) -- Parliament will be dissolved tomorrow, setting the stage for Malaysia's general election eight months before its five-year term ends.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi ended weeks of speculation about when he would call for fresh polls in a brief press statement.

Abdullah said the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin Syed Putra Jamalullail signed the declaration to dissolve parliament.

The Election Commission said it would meet in four days to fix dates for nominations and polling in the country's 11th general election.

All state legislative assemblies, except in Sarawak, which held its state election in 2001, will also be dissolved tomorrow.

Under the country's constitution, general election must be held within 60 days of the dissolution of parliament.

Polling for the previous general election was held on Nov 29 1999 when the country had 9.7 million registered voters.

This time around the electorate has increased by some 600,000.

The number of parliamentary seats has increased by 26 to 219 and the state seats by 63 to 505.

In the last general election, the Barisan Nasional (BN), which has been in power since the country's independence in 1957, won 148 parliamentary seats but the number swelled to 152 when Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) rejoined the coalition in January 2002 and the BN won the Pendang by-election in July the same year.

The BN won 281 of the 394 state seats it contested then but lost the Lunas seat to Keadilan in a by-election in November 2000.

The main opposition party, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), which retained Kelantan and captured Terengganu from the BN in the 1999 election, has 26 seats in the outgoing parliament and 98 state seats.

Of the other opposition parties, the DAP has 10 parliamentary

seats and

11 state seats and Keadilan five parliamentary seats and five state seats.

Abdullah is going to the people to seek a mandate five months after taking over as prime minister from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the first change at the helm of the federal government in 22 years.

Since then a "feel good" feeling has been sweeping the country with stronger economic fundamentals and the Kuala Lumpur stock market reaching its four-year high last week.

Sceptics and analysts attributed this to Abdullah's non-confrontational foreign relations as well as his stepped-up anti-corruption drive.

Last month, the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) arrested two prominent figures, former managing director of state-owned Perwaja Steel Sdn Bhd Tan Sri Eric Chia and cabinet minister Tan Sri Kasitah Gaddam.

Chia is charged with criminal breach of trust while Kasitah faces corruption and cheating charges. Kasitah has since resigned.

Abdullah said last week he was confident that the BN would retain power with more than a two-thirds majority this time as his new policy initiatives had the support of the overwhelming majority of the people.

During a visit to Iran two weeks ago, he said that the high-profile arrests were a process of law enforcement, adding that it was not right for him to interfere or protect anyone.

"A honeymoon period for him, there has been some kind of enthusiasm (about Abdullah) over the last four months," said Dr Syed Husin Ali, the president of the opposition Parti Rakyat Malaysia who has run in several elections but has yet to win.

"He made some correct statements, like against corruption and improving the civil service. That sent a strong signal to the people," he told Bernama.

New Sunday Times columnist Datuk Dr Munir Majid said Abdullah's soaring popularity would give an edge at this point of time to call for an early election.

"He is riding the wave of popularity because of his early actions

indicating his tone of administration that is widely welcomed by the public," he said.

Dr Munir said the new premier is confident and clear of what he wants and wants it quickly.

"He wants his popular claims to be expressed in mandate by the electorate so that he can pursue his policies further. He wants a fresh mandate to have new faces (in his administration), people who can perform at state and parliamentary level. He wants to build his own team," he added.

Analysts said Umno, the backbone of the BN which was facing huge problems in 1999 following the sacking of then Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, is in a much better shape this time to face the polls.

Dr Nidzam Sulaiman, a political scientist from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, said opposition parties except PAS appeared to have more problems in the coming election.

"But Umno has built up more confidence this time around," he said.

During the 1999 polls, many voters in the Malay heartland switched to the opposition camps, deserting their traditional support for Umno.

But the mood has changed. Now many Malay voters are back into the Umno fold, said Dr Nidzam.

"With Abdullah, voters' confidence and support for Barisan Nasional has increased in the past months and now is the right time to go to the electorate for a clear mandate to lead the nation," he said.

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