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It's the best time to go to the polls for Abdullah

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THE guessing game is over. Parliament has been dissolved paving the way for the country's 11th general election. In recent weeks there has been only one question from Malaysians and foreigners alike - when are the elections?

Now that the question has been answered attention has been shifted to candidates, campaigns and contests.

The party machinery and workers are all geared up and ready to roll. Printers have been working overtime, the souvenir makers are busy printing T-shirts and badges and the parties are burning the midnight oil to have their manifestoes ready.

The pundits say this is the best time for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to go to the polls. They point to the "feel good" factor and the support shown by the rakyat for the leadership. The Prime Minister and the country has everything going for it, they argue.

Good gross domestic product (GDP) growth figures, the buoyant stock market, increased interest from foreign fund managers and entrepreneurs add to the "feel good" environment all round. Add to this the rising commodity prices, including palm oil, which adds to the smiles as it means more money in the pockets of the rural folk.

The stock market, though having eased a little following the announcement, has attracted funds in the run up to the dissolution of Parliament. Analysts, economists and fund managers expect the market to move side ways in the next few days. "Once the announcement is out, the focus will be on the campaigning and no longer on the market," according to Choo Swee Kee, fund manager at KLCS Asset Management.

"Buying has been on expectations, so we see a quiet market until polling date. Some of the blue chips that rallied might take a breather on profit-taking," he said.

The forecast nevertheless is that the market would gain further ground following the election results as has been the case in previous elections.

Barisan Nasional which is expected to be returned to power with an overwhelming majority will provide the added boost to the market. The business community, both local and foreign, is bullish as it expects the strong and business friendly policies to continue.

Continuity and predictability are important for businesses and this is one of the major plus points for Malaysia in attracting foreign direct investment and equity funds.

The corporate sector is confident that the business environment will be made even more attractive with the move to enhance transparency, deal with corruption and further improve the delivery services with the added stress on quality education.

The president of the American Malaysian Chamber of Commerce, Datuk Timothy Garland, expressed confidence that the Government would focus on "corruption and transparency" after the elections. The new administration will be on a stronger footing, with a larger majority, to deal with these issues.

Ernest Z. Bower, president of the US Asean Business Council, points out that Abdullah's "early work to fight corruption and consolidate Malaysia's amazing growth over the last two decades is impressive, and sends a strong positive signal to investors".

The US business community is hopeful that with a strong mandate

Abdullah's administration would work towards a Malaysia-US Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) leading to the inauguration of free trade negotiations next year.

The business community is hopeful that the rules and regulations will be even more conducive for business. If the private sector is to be the engine of growth the rules and regulations should facilitate and not hinder.

With increased competition for limited foreign funds, Malaysia needs to provide the investor and businessmen an efficient environment. To maintain a competitive edge a well qualified, educated and quality workforce is needed, even more so in the current electronic and IT era.

Malaysia's first elections in the new century will be different. The "Badawi factor" is seen as a major boost that will see the Barisan Nasional through with an overwhelming majority.

The Islamic credentials of the Prime Minister have also dented the arguments of the Opposition, namely Pas. They have no issues. In fact the Government has dealt with or has aired the issues that concern the rakyat - corruption, transparency and delivery of services.

But this does not mean that the Barisan Nasional can afford to be complacent. It has the benefits of incumbency but at the same time it also faces challenges. Umno, the dominant party in the coalition, must regain ground it lost in the 1999.

A total of 219 parliament seats and 505 state seats are up for grabs. But undoubtedly the main battle will be in the Malay heartland. The Umno machinery will have to use different approaches and tactics in the Opposition-held States to win them back. The Barisan component parties will have to use different tactics to attract voters to their side.

Of the 25 million Malaysians, 10 million are eligible to vote and more than three million are Umno members. With a relatively young population, many of the voters and certainly the first-time voters have only known one leader - Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Both the political parties and voters are faced with a totally different political environment this time. But the timing for the Government could not be better.