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2004 - Election and more elections

THIS year will see changes and developments in the country. Foremost, of course, is the impending 11th general election. Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will be leading Barisan Nasional in his inaugural polls since assuming the Prime Minister's post.

With sentiments now favouring the ruling coalition, a convincing victory for BN will give Abdullah a stamp of legitimacy in leading the country after taking over from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad last October.

Political parties from BN and the Opposition, in anticipation of the election this year, have intensified their activities like election preparation programmes and activated their election machinery while elected representatives have been meeting their constituents more frequently.

Many are expecting the polls to be held early in the year because the BN leadership has indicated that the Sabah State election, to be held by June, will be held simultaneously with the general election.

The term for the Sabah State Legislative Assembly will end in April but the election law allows for the election to be held within 60 days from the date the State Legislative Assembly is dissolved.

The general election must be held by early next year as the current term of Parliament ends in December.

Many also believe that Abdullah, who is also Umno president, will announce the candidate for the deputy prime minister's post this year - widely anticipated to be a toss between Umno vice-presidents Datuk Seri Najib Razak and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

There are also a handful from the Opposition camp who think Abdullah is in no hurry to name the deputy prime minister because there is no provision for such an appointment in the Federal Constitution. Abdullah can always appoint a senior minister to carry out his duties when he is away.

But others feel that an early announcement will reduce tension between Najib and Muhyiddin supporters.

For the first time, the Umno general assembly scheduled this year will see elections at all three levels - branch, division and supreme council - held in the same year instead of different years. There will be a gap of a month or two between elections at each level.

This follows amendments to the party constitution, which were passed in November 2000, allowing for the branch election to be held first, followed by divisions and supreme council.

The last branch election was held in 2002, divisional election in 2001 and supreme council election in 2000.

Intense fight is expected for posts in the supreme council, especially those of vice-presidents and Umno Youth head. Many contenders will vie for the three vice-president posts, especially to fill the vacancy when one of them moves up as the deputy president.

Talks of contest for the Umno Youth head post involving incumbent Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein and Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Khir Toyo have also been going on for some time. There have also been efforts by some quarters to persuade Hishammuddin to contest for a vice-president post, thus paving the way for an easy Dr Mohd Khir victory for the Umno Youth head post.

The divisional elections are also expected to see some intense fights,

especially in Kelantan where four division heads were dropped when the pro-tem committees were announced on Nov 22.

Puteri Umno will also see a change as the incumbent chief Datuk Azalina Othman Said has passed the 40-year age limit for the post.

A likely contender is current deputy head Noraini Ahmad, who is likely to face challenges from one of the executive council members.

As for Wanita Umno, its incumbent Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz is expected to be returned unopposed together with her deputy Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil.

In MCA, observers are watching closely if old Team A-Team B rivalries will resurface after the general election, especially in the run-up to the triennial party polls next year.

While party leaders insist that the rivalry is a thing of the past, sceptics feel that the peace is a temporary truce and might blow up after the general election.

As for the proposed MCA-Gerakan merger, it is likely that talks between both parties to iron out the technicalities will only gain momentum after the general election. A merger is unlikely to happen in the near future.

As for the Indian-based parties, the "war" between MIC and IPF is likely to continue. MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, after 25 years at the helm, might continue to be the target of IPF president Datuk M.G. Pandithan's unrelenting criticism as pressure mounts on Samy Vellu to give way to younger leaders.

The controversy surrounding MIC's investment arm Maika Holdings will continue to dominate the headlines.

The People's Progressive Party is expected to be given a shot in the arm in the general election when the party fields a candidate for the first time.

President Datuk M. Kayveas, now a Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department through his appointment as a Senator, is likely to be given a parliamentary seat in Perak to contest.

As for the Opposition, it is expected to be smooth sailing for Pas. Party leaders, including president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, who were elected last year will continue with the struggle to set up Pas' version of an Islamic state. They will try to sell the concept to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The term of elected DAP central executive committee members, who were elected in 2001, ends this year. DAP national chairman Lim Kit Siang and deputy chairman Karpal Singh, barring a poor showing by DAP in the general election, are expected to remain in their posts.

Parti Keadilan Nasional elections are also due this year but the party is unlikely to hold an election as last year's annual general assembly, scheduled in December was postponed to enable the party to concentrate on the general election.

The party's supreme council will decide on the new date for the deferred general assembly in the first week of January as it has until April 26 to hold the assembly.

However, should the Registrar of Societies approve its application to amend its constitution to merge with Parti Rakyat Malaysia (resulting in Parti Keadilan Rakyat), PKR will hold its inaugural election instead.

Keadilan and PRM launched PKR on Aug 3, without the ROS' approval.

Besides politics, several other significant developments are taking place on the local front this year.

After hosting the Non-Aligned Movement and Organisation of Islamic Conference summits last year, Malaysia will host the first Commonwealth Tourism Ministers' Conference in March, an event that is set to be a catalyst for the tourism sector among member countries.

Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir said the conference would indirectly boost other sectors, such as education and health.

Planned during the Commonwealth Business Forum held in Kuala Lumpur last year, he said the conference to be held annually, would set a new era in developing tourism in Commonwealth countries.

It will be preceded by a senior officials meeting and a Commonwealth business forum.

This year, 85,000 17-year-olds will attend a three-month National Service stint next month.

The training is staggered over three batches at 45 camps nationwide.

Cabinet Committee on National Service Programme chairman Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who made the announcement after the selection process (random balloting) was completed, said the National Registration Department had picked 478,850 boys and girls, born in 1986, who would be eligible for the programme.

Najib added that they included 419,000 youths from government and private schools, while the rest had stopped schooling or are working.

In ensuring that the programme is without hiccups, the Education Ministry has deferred admission dates for matriculation and Form Six till May 10 and May 15 respectively to allow those involved in National Service to complete their training.

Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamed said the admission date for public institutions of higher learning was also revised to June 15 while polytechnics and community colleges would begin classes from June 20.

Those selected for the first intake, Musa said, would start from Feb 16 to May 2 and with the revision, would have no difficulty with the admission dates.

However, those selected for the second intake, beginning March 22 will only complete the programme on June 13. They will be allowed to leave earlier and complete the remaining of the training next year.

This year also promises music enthusiasts cheaper compact discs and video compact discs as the Government will enforce the new ceiling prices for optical discs.

Last September, the ceiling price for VCDs was fixed at RM14. For locally-produced CDs, the ceiling prices were between RM21 for local artistes and RM29 for foreign performers.

The new pricing does not cover imported CDs and VCDs, digital video discs, cassettes and computer software.

Muhyiddin, who is Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister, said the ministry would spend about RM1.5 million for some 100 consumer programmes to educate and solve problems faced by consumers.

Another 500 such programmes are scheduled for the first four months of the year.

In ensuring the public gets its money worth, Muhyiddin had warned the industry players not to compromise on the quality of their products.

As for the much talked about speed limit issue, the Government will go ahead with plans to increase the speed limit on certain highways from 110kph to 120kph.

This, Works Minister Samy Vellu said, was despite the high accident and fatality rates recorded during festive seasons.

Several States, including Selangor and Johor, would also implement new policies and programmes.

Government servants and employees of statutory bodies in Selangor will have to pay their zakat through salary deductions to the Selangor Zakat Centre (PZS).

State Secretary Datuk Abdul Aziz Mohd Yusof, during a meeting with civil

servants in Shah Alam when announcing the directive recently, said the State Government would issue circulars to all civil servants on the salary deduction scheme.

The State will be the first to make the salary deduction compulsory.

Johor will set up its Biotechnology and Biodiversity Action Council this year to better co-ordinate research and development efforts for industries, especially those involved in producing agriculture and natural products.

State Science and Technology Committee chairman Md Salikon Sarpin said the council, which would be based at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in Skudai, would use the research facilities there to carry out its work.

The council would have four departments planning, research, development and incubator, promotion, information and support.

"It will receive technical support from the university as well as relevant government agencies such as Mardi on agricultural research."

Car buyers this year are offered more choices as Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Bhd (Proton), which is facing increased competition from car importers, will be introducing several new models.

Chief executive officer Tan Sri Tengku Mahaleel Tengku Ariff said Proton would introduce "a number" of new models to curb declining sales and eroding market share, in time for the sector's full market liberalisation next year.

The national car maker, Tengku Mahaleel, will roll out the new models, one by one.

On the international relations front, Malaysia, in enhancing trade ties with its trading partners, will begin talks early this year to eliminate import tariffs and other trade barriers.

The negotiations between Prime Minister Abdullah and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to push for a Japan-Malaysia Economic Partnerships Agreement (JMEPA), which encompasses a free trade agreement (FTA) between the two countries, will liberalise trade of goods and services.

The JMEPA will also include agreements on tourism, standardisation of regulations and intellectual property.