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March 21 is Polling Day (HL)

Sarban Singh

PUTRAJAYA, Fri. - Malaysia's election day is on March 21 with nomination of candidates fixed for March 13.

A seven-day campaign will precede voting where Malaysians will decide who will rule them for the next five years.

Election Commission chairman Tan Sri Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman announced the election and nomination dates at a packed Press conference, carried live on national television, after a 90-minute meeting of the EC.

The election writ, marking the last legal process towards realising the democratic process of voting, will be issued tomorrow, making this 11th Malaysian election one of the shortest in history. Nevertheless, all political parties had anticipated an election and had been having political gatherings for some time now.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the country's fifth leader since independence in 1957, is seeking his first mandate. He took office on Oct 31 last year after Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the country's Prime Minister for 22 years, retired.

Abdullah's Barisan Nasional coalition of 14 parties, which has won every election since 1957, is seeking another term on the back of a surging economy and improved public confidence in its leadership.

The BN won the last election in 1999, winning 75 per cent of seats, but suffered setbacks by losing many traditional strongholds to an opposition which made corruption and former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's sacking and jailing its main issues.

A total of 27 parties are eligible to contest. In the last general election, 32 parties contested.

At stake is control of the Federal Government through 219 parliamentary seats, and 12 of the 13 State Governments where 505 State seats are open for contest. Only Sarawak will have its election in 2006.

Based on latest verified electoral rolls, 10.28 million Malaysians are eligible to vote. About 800,000 are first time voters and another 200,700 are postal voters. Despite the eligibility of the many political parties, the main opposition to the BN will still come from Pas, DAP and Keadilan.

While all three parties said they are prepared, they go to battle a fractured and pale shadow of 1999.

The issues that forged them together in 1999 were too fragile to hold the opposition coalition together, with all three now having differences with each other. They are also not contesting as one team this time, with the exception of some loose co-operation.

Asked about complaints that the campaigning period appeared too short, Rashid said: "As far as we are concerned, the period given is sufficient."

He said that based on police records, the main opposition and ruling political parties had been issued 11,692 permits to conduct ceramah and other related activities over the last four years.

"Please don't tell me I am being unfair to the Opposition. If I am unfair, it's to the ruling party (Barisan Nasional) as they will have more constituencies to cover unlike the Opposition which will not be contesting in all areas," he said.