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New faces to the fore (HL)

PUTRAJAYA, Wed. - The Barisan Nasional will undergo a generational change in the general election, with new faces making up more than 30 per cent of the coalition's candidates for state and parliamentary constituencies.

The coalition's main partners - Umno, MCA, Gerakan and MIC - will each present candidate slates comprising between 30 and 50 per cent new contenders, a departure from the past when only 15 to 20 per cent of incumbents were dropped or changed.

At least four ministers, possibly more, are expected to retire or be dropped.

At least two States - Johor and Negri Sembilan - will have new Menteris Besar, while Penang will get a new Deputy Chief Minister following Datuk Dr Hilmi Yahaya's shift to a parliamentary seat, believed to be Balik Pulau.

Four deputy ministers, including MIC's long-serving Datuk S. Subramaniam and three from Umno, are being dropped. Several more are likely to be replaced.

Of Umno's 75 MPs, more than 20 are either retiring or being dropped to make way for new candidates, who include Islamic scholars, top civil servants and professionals.

All MCA ministers and deputy ministers have been retained, although about 30 of the party's 130 constituencies will see new candidates.

Party president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting said the candidates were chosen on their performances and track records.

"Some have withdrawn and several others have been dropped for various reasons," Ong said. "It will be a balanced team. We have candidates who are young and old, men and women, experienced and new."

Gerakan has dropped almost 50 per cent of its incumbents, with four veteran politicians not contesting: Penang executive councillor Datuk Kee Phaik Cheen, Selangor executive councillor Datuk Lum Weng Keong, Kulai state assemblyman Khoo Che Wat and Kuala Sepetang state assemblyman Datuk Siow Kok Kan.

Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, who will defend his Beruas parliamentary seat, said: "Some who have served for a long time agreed to withdraw. Some withdrew because of family problems. And some who did not withdraw, I made sure they withdrew!"

MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, in naming his party's candidates, dropped a bombshell by excluding deputy president Datuk S. Subramaniam. The Works Minister said Subramaniam would make way for Dr S. Subramaniam, Malacca MIC deputy chairman.

Datuk Subramaniam expressed shock over the decision and said he would not retire from active politics. "I still have the energy and drive to serve the community," he insisted.

Retiring Umno veterans include former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, former Deputy Prime Minister Tun Ghafar Baba, former ministers Datuk Paduka Zaleha Ismail, Datuk Napsiah Omar, and former Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Zahar Ujang.

MPs retiring or unlikely to be chosen include Datuk Railey Jeffrey, Datuk Dr Yusof Yaacob, Datu Amir Kahar Mustapha (all from Sabah), Datuk Abdul Kadir Annuar, Datuk Ali Hassan, Datuk Ruhanie Ahmad (Johor), Datuk Abdullah Fadzil Che Wan (Perak), Datuk Mohd Zain (Penang), Datuk Abu Bakar Taib (Kedah), Tan Sri Dr Abdul Hamid Pawanteh (Perlis) and Datuk Mohamed

Abdullah (Pahang).

Several more are expected to be dropped from the final list.

Prime Minister and acting Umno president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi rescheduled a 3pm official visit to Perlis to later tonight to sort out the final list.

On arrival in Perlis, Abdullah apologised to those gathered for the launch of the state-level Islam Hadhari programme for his late arrival.

"I was not able to come at the scheduled time because it is not easy to select candidates. The list is not finalised.

"It is not easy ... we say this, they say that. That is why until now it is not finalised. But I am not worried about this difficulty because it is my role as the PM," he said.

Among the new candidates are the managing director of Cycle & Carriage Berhad, Datuk Mohamad Hassan, who is likely to be appointed Negri Sembilan Menteri Besar, replacing five-term MB Tan Sri Isa Abdul Samad.

Another is Datuk Dr Masitah Ibrahim, who will take on Pas heavyweight Azimuddin Taib, the former Imam of Masjid Negara, for the Baling parliamentary constituency.

Puteri Umno head Datuk Azalina Othman Said is expected to contest the Pengerang parliamentary constituency in Johor.

In Kelantan, state Umno liaison chief Datuk Mustapa Mohamed will contest the Jeli parliamentary seat and one of the constituency's three state seats of Kuala Balah, Bukit Bunga or Air Lanas.

Pas president Datuk Seri Hadi Awang's former coursemate at the Madina Islamic University, Datuk Dr Abdullah Muhammad Zin, will be the Umno candidate for the Besut parliamentary seat.

Masjid Negara's Imam Datuk Pirdaus Ismail, 38, is tipped to contest against Parti Keadilan Nasional president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail for the Permatang Pauh parliamentary constituency.

Abdullah's political secretary, Datuk Johari Baharom, a graduate teacher, will take Dr Mahathir's vacated Kubang Pasu seat.

Deputy Minister Datuk Khaled Nordin will contest a state seat in Johor and is likely to replace Datuk Ghani Othman as Menteri Besar. Ghani will contest a federal seat.

Abdullah had promised that he would field a mixture of old and new faces, replacing retiring politicians with professionals who could meet the expectations of the rakyat.

All the candidates were vetted by the police, Internal Revenue Board and Anti-Corruption Agency, and only those with a clean bill were chosen.

However, Abdullah has warned that he will not protect anyone who transgresses the rules, and will ensure that the law takes its course.