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Parliament dissolves today (HL)

Syed Nadzri; Brendan Pereira

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Parliament will be dissolved tomorrow, clearing the way for the country's much-anticipated 11th general election.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi ended months of speculation today when he issued a statement saying that the Yang di-Pertuan Agong had consented to dissolve the current sitting of Parliament, the first step in the process of getting 10.4 million registered voters to cast their ballots.

With the exception of Sarawak, all 12 State Assemblies will be dissolved tomorrow. Sarawak had its state election in 2001, and the State Government's term ends only in 2006.

The Election Commission will meet on Friday to decide on polling and nomination dates.

According to the Federal Constitution, a general election must be held within 60 days of the dissolution of Parliament. Election regulations stipulate that the earliest nominations can be held is four days after the dissolution of Parliament or a State Assembly, while the earliest polling dates are seven days after nomination.

In the last two elections - 1995 and 1999 - nominations were within nine days and polling within 19 days of dissolution. If that is the precedent to be used, then nominations could be, by the latest, on March 13 and polling by March 23.

However, the EC may decide to have it earlier as it has said it is already fully prepared for the election.

The current five-year term of the Barisan Nasional ends only in November, but an early election has been on the cards ever since Abdullah took over from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Oct 31 last year.

Positive response from the public for his efforts to tackle corruption and change the nation's economic system as well as a feel-good factor from an accelerating economy all combined to make an early election date a real possibility.

At stake will be 219 parliamentary seats and 505 state seats in 12 State Assemblies, expanded respectively from 194 and 394 following the periodic redrawing of electoral boundaries last year.

The Barisan Nasional has a comfortable two-thirds majority in the Dewan Rakyat and is widely expected to extend this margin.

The first post-Mahathir era election will be watched closely for several reasons. It will be a yardstick of popular support for Abdullah's policies and initiatives. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people have embraced his ideas for a more efficient, incorruptible and hospitable Malaysia.

A good performance by Umno in the Malay belt States of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu will also indicate that the green tide of Pas, bolstered in 1999 by the Anwar Ibrahim issue, has been checked.

Pas wants to turn Malaysia into an Islamic state.

Abdullah's move to call for elections now received overwhelming support from State BN leaders who described it as timely.

Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam reflected sentiment on the ground when he said: "We have been preparing for this for a long time and now it is time for us to move aggressively to ensure a resounding BN victory."

Most of the state leaders said that their election machinery had been

cranked up. All that was left to be done was for them to finalise their list of candidates, before forwarding it to Abdullah.

Abdullah spent the whole of this evening finalising details of the BN manifesto.