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EC should be given power to regulate political parties

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THE next general election is not due until November 2004 but election fever is already upon us. The uncertainty and speculation concerning the date of the next general election is partly due to our system that the Prime Minister of the day can call for an election at any time before the constitutional expiry term of five years of the Dewan Rakyat.

An early election however can be reasonably expected following the decision of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last year to delay his retirement until after the Organisation of Islamic Conference meeting to be held in Putrajaya in October this year.

In recent weeks, all political parties are making preparations for the general election. Umno itself has decided to postpone its party elections due this year to after the general election to enable the party to concentrate all efforts on the general election.

In the meantime, the election machinery has to be readied to conduct a free and fair election in compliance with constitutional provisions.

The Election Commission is in the process of completing the once-in-10-years delineation of Federal and State constituencies and has yet to submit its report to the Prime Minister. It is safe to assume that the next general election will not be held until after this exercise is completed.

Next, there is the matter of the electoral rolls. It is the duty of the EC to revise the electoral rolls from time to time. Fortunately, with the introduction of voter registration throughout the year at any post office and the offices of the EC nationwide, the electoral rolls can be expected to be as up-to-date as they can reasonably be.

In this connection, it was more than somewhat a surprise when Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak, the Umno vice-president, revealed recently that more than 400,000 Umno members are not registered as voters. It is more than likely that there are members of other political parties who are also not registered as voters. What then is the commitment of our politicians?

Perhaps our education system should inculcate in the young that the right to vote is not only a constitutional right conferred on every citizen but a civic duty to be acquired, treasured and exercised throughout their lives from the age of 21.

A noticeable change today is to discard the old habit of doing things at the last moment. In this regard the EC is being proactive on two fronts, namely the timely removal of phantom voters from the electoral rolls and proposals to amend the electoral laws.

Phantom voters have plagued previous elections and the initiative of the EC to assign voters to constituencies according to the address given in their identity cards is a positive step towards cleansing the electoral rolls for future elections. Rightly, only resident citizens should be allowed to vote in the constituency and a voter who turns up to vote in a constituency which does not include his identity card address should be refused the right to vote even though his name is registered on the electoral roll of the constituency.

The EC is calling for a meeting of representatives of all political parties to discuss its proposals to make certain amendments to the electoral laws. This illustrates the transparency expected of an independent institution like the EC in the discharge of its constitutional functions.

One of the proposals is that all political parties should be registered with the EC to enable them to participate in the elections. At present all political parties are registered with the Registrar of Societies. The proposal should be taken a step further in that a political party registered with the EC will be exempted from registration with the ROS.

The EC should be given the power now exercised by the ROS in regulating political parties. The EC is an independent body created by the Constitution. The ROS is a department of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

There is a perception that the ROS is not entirely impartial in its dealings with all political parties. To place the regulation of political parties under the EC will remove such misconceptions.

For years rival political parties claim to represent a particular community or a section of the same community. The best way to determine actual support is to provide for a party preference vote at every election on a regional basis, namely peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak to represent the parties by proportional representation in the Dewan Rakyat, not exceeding one-third additional seats.

Whatever the date of the next general election may be, it is clear that the leadership of the present Government is going to change in midstream. Following past practice, Pak Lah will be given time to consolidate his power before calling an election in his own right.