

All parties gear up for early polls
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Political parties have begun preparations for a possible early general election ahead of a meeting today with top leaders of the ruling coalition government.

Parliamentary opposition leader Lim Kit Siang told AFP the ruling Barisan Nasional's supreme council meeting today would see party component leaders assess preparations for the next election and pick a possible date.

"Any time from October this year onwards is likely, because the prime minister's time is running out," Lim said.

Lim, the leader of DAP, said elections as early as October were possible because of growing public frustration with Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's weak administration and the economic situation.

"He is feeling boxed and cornered because he has failed to deliver his promises after three years in power. He has to focus now on how to create the feel-good factor again," Lim said.

Abdullah has faced criticism for failing to live up to his election promise of weeding out corruption.

Lim said recent allegations of graft and sexual assault against the chief of the nation's anti-corruption agency had damaged the "integrity and credibility" of Abdullah's efforts to stamp out corruption.

PAS' challenge

Leaders of the opposition Islamic party PAS met Sunday to discuss campaign plans if Abdullah announces early elections.

"There has been a lot of guesswork going on about the elections in Malaysia. Some countries would have announced it way ahead so every party has a fair chance of preparing themselves," PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang told reporters.

"However, we will still be taking part in the next general election and we continue our fight for true democracy," he said.

Abdul Hadi said the toughest challenge PAS faced was reaching the voters, as the opposition had no access to mainstream media in Malaysia, which is widely controlled by parties in the ruling coalition.

The party, which aims to turn multicultural Malaysia into a theocratic state under Islamic rule, suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the ruling coalition in the last 2004 elections.

Machinery in place

The Barisan Nasional coalition that has ruled Malaysia for almost half a century consists of the dominant Umno, MCA, MIC and other smaller parties.

The New Sunday Times daily on Sunday quoted top coalition politicians as saying their parties were prepared to face an early election.

"I personally do not think the elections will be called soon. But if it happens, the party is ready. Our machinery is in place," said Umno information chief Muhammad Muhammad Taib.

MCA vice president Donald Lim said the party's grassroots had begun preparing since the last elections ended in 2004. "We are ready for the election, whenever it is called," Lim said.

MIC president G Palanivel told the newspaper the party had been holding regular meetings with its grassroots supporters and had "never taken the voters for granted."

Malaysia must see a general election within five years after 2004, with the latest possible date being March 2009.

Abdullah has ruled out calling snap polls, but said the government would instead focus on implementing mega-projects rolled out under the ambitious ninth Malaysian Plan, a national development agenda.

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