

Prepare for early polls, says EC chief
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The Election Commission today called on eligible citizens to register as voters, saying preparations by the ruling coalition signalled an early general election.

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has been coy on flagging a date for the election, which must be held by early 2009, but his ruling coalition discussed polls at a key meeting last month.

"We are already talking about elections, don't take this lightly. When leaders talk about elections and start discussing grassroots election machinery, then what do you think about that?" election commission chairman Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman told reporters.

"The electoral roll will be ready by August this year for the next general election. After that, anything can happen," he added.

Abdul Rashid said he hoped to finalise and release the electoral roll by December.

"I hope elections will not be called by then. That is why the election commission is taking steps to get people to register now or they will miss the next polls."

The last general election was in March 2004 and it must hold another within five years of the new parliament's first sitting.

Five million not registered

Abdul Rashid said Malaysia had to go to the polls by May 16, 2009, but noted parliaments rarely saw full five-year terms.

"If you look at history, parliament has always been dissolved after four years," he said.

He said 15.21 million of the country's population of nearly 27 million are eligible to vote, but only 10.2 million were registered.

Expectations are rising of an early vote, with opposition parties saying Abdullah will call polls soon to head off what they say is growing disenchantment with his administration.

Analysts also expect an election before opposition leader and former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim becomes eligible to participate in formal politics.

Anwar has a corruption conviction against him, which bars him from standing for public office until April 2008.

Abdullah has brushed aside the speculation, insisting he wants to focus on implementing mega-projects under a five-year development plan unveiled a year ago.

Poll 'goodies' not vote-buying

Meanwhile, the EC chief said that development goodies announced by the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition in the run-up to last Thursday's Machap by-election in Malacca cannot be considered as vote buying.

"Ministers and functionaries, people connected to the government, they're doing their job," Abdul Rashid was quoted by the Sun as saying.

He also stressed that his commission was not empowered to punish political parties for such practises, adding that the EC could only "advise" the contestants to fight in "a clean way".

"Vote-buying is for the Anti-Corruption Agency (to investigate)," he told the Sun. "Of course, if evidence is there, the party can bring the case to court and they (the courts) will decide," he said.

Abdul Rashid was nevertheless quick to say add that judges had previously ruled that the promises of development projects did not violate the election law.

Among the 'goodies' given out during the campaigning of the Machap by-election a RM3.7 million allocation to Felda Machap to upgrade water pipes, construct a multi-purpose hall and repair a mosque.

The state constituency of 10,000-odd voters also saw newly-paved roads, hundreds of new street lamps, and a RM1.2 million recreational park in which its first phase was completed within weeks, just before the by-election.

According to opposition DAP which lost in Machap, such promises were an offence under the Election Offences Act 1954.

Party leader Lim Guan Eng will be making an official complaint on the matter to the EC today.

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