

50 per cent voter turnout expected for direct elections

By Our Political Desk

THE Government is expecting a 50 per cent voter turnout for Hong Kong's maiden direct elections to the Legislative Council after 55 candidates declared their nominations for the 18 seats on offer.

Another 40 candidates have joined the race for the 21 functional seats, of which 12 were returned unopposed.

The polls are dominated by professional men aged between 31 and 50, while

there were only six women contenders in the total pool of candidates as nominations closed yesterday.

Electoral officials are optimistic that an average of three nominees vying for each directly-elected seat will attract half the registered voters to the ballot box.

Since all nine double-seat geographical constituencies are contested, all the 354 polling stations will open from 7.30 am to 10.30 pm for the record number of 1.9

million registered voters on September 15.

Kowloon East has emerged as the most competitive district with eight candidates competing for two openings.

It could have drawn nine contenders, but Mr Tang Man-chun withdrew his candidacy yesterday, saying the \$200,000 ceiling on campaign expenses was too low.

He suggested that some nominees had been overspending to sustain their canvassing activities.

The Independent Commission Against Corruption has so far received eight complaints relating to the elections.

Apart from overspending, the cases also cover alleged bribery, registration of false addresses and treating electors for votes.

The Principal Assistant Secretary for Constitutional Affairs, Mr Francis Ho Suen-wai, noted that the turnout rate had reached a peak of 50 per cent in the

1982 New Territories district board elections.

"If we work harder this time, the figure can reach another historic high of over 50 per cent," he said.

The head of the Registration and Electoral Office, Mr Wan Yiu-sing, said the emergence of party politics and the polling arrangement on a Sunday would help boost the turnout rate.

The United Democrats, led by legislator Mr Martin Lee Chu-ming, has fielded

the biggest contingent of 13 candidates for the direct polls. Its main rival, the Liberal Democratic Federation, has five.

Although only nine of the 21 functional seats are contested, Mr Wan described the tally as encouraging compared with those of the two previous polls.

He noted that a record high of 66,000 electors would be involved in the September 12 functional elections. The figures for 1988 and 1985 were only

16,000 and 43,000 respectively.

Mr Wan also rejected criticism from the Professional Teachers' Union that the Government had neglected promotion of the indirect elections.

"Given the much smaller size of electorate in the indirect poll, it is inevitable that the Government would pay more efforts to promote the direct elections."

Meanwhile, political commentator Dr Lo Chi-kin is optimistic about the 50

per cent turnout prediction for the direct elections.

He said the large pool of candidates, extensive media coverage, and the Sunday polling arrangement would all contribute to a high turnout.

But he noted that the fact that only one incumbent appointed legislator had joined the direct polls could result in a polarisation of the assembly.