

## **Malaysia goes to polls tomorrow, battle between former leader against elite protege**

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### **The ruling National Front lost its two-thirds majority in parliament in 2008 elections and lost the popular vote in 2013. (File)**

**Kuala Lumpur:** Voters have a stark choice in Malaysia's election tomorrow: resurrect the country's 92-year-old former authoritarian leader or give a third term to Prime Minister Najib Razak, whose alleged role in the multibillion-dollar ransacking of a state investment fund has battered Malaysia's standing abroad. Najib's ruling party, in control for six decades, is likely to hold on to power due to an electoral system that gives more weight to rural voters, analysts say, but at the price of reduced legitimacy.

The contest pits Najib, a political blue blood, against his former political mentor, Mahathir Mohamad, prime minister for 22 years until 2003 and credited with modernizing Malaysia. Angered by the corruption scandal that engulfed the state investment fund set up and overseen by Najib, Mahathir defected from the ruling coalition's dominant United Malays National Organization party and joined forces with opposition parties who had regarded him as their chief nemesis.

US investigators say \$4.5 billion was stolen from 1MDB, the investment fund, by associates of Najib between 2009 and 2014, including \$700 million that landed in Najib's bank account. He denies any wrongdoing. The graft and money laundering scandal, under investigation by several countries including Malaysia's ally the US, as well as the 2015 imposition of a goods and services tax that hit poor Malays hardest, have been foremost in voters' minds. Yet the perennial race card in Malaysian politics, that an opposition victory would pave the way for ethnic minority Chinese to dominate the country politically, is still a powerful subterranean force.

"The more fundamental primal underpinnings of Malaysian politics remain," said Ibrahim Suffian, co-founder of the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research. "The overt campaign talks about issues of the economy and cost of living, but underneath that there is a continuing discussion about who is best suited to maintain the interests of the majority Malay Muslim population."

The ruling National Front lost its two-thirds majority in parliament in 2008 elections and lost the popular vote in 2013, its worst ever result. That year it won 47 percent of the votes but still secured 60 percent of the seats in parliament due to the electoral system that makes votes in Malay-dominated rural seats, which traditionally support the coalition, more powerful than urban votes. Tindak, a group that lobbies for electoral reform, estimates one third of voters decide half of the seats.

Analysts say the ruling coalition is likely to keep a parliamentary majority in Wednesday's election even if its share of the vote shrinks again. If it performs particularly badly, Najib could face challengers from within his own party or the government itself might not survive a full term because minor parties within the coalition could defect. In a pre-election statement, Najib savaged Mahathir as a self-confessed "dictator." He said a vote for the opposition jeopardizes Malaysia's strong economic growth and that the leaders of the opposition's dominant Chinese-based party were deceiving voters by "camouflaging" themselves behind Malays.

The opposition has been reinvigorated by Mahathir after fracturing in 2015 when its most charismatic figure, Anwar Ibrahim, was imprisoned on charges of sodomy in a case he and his supporters said was manufactured by the

government to crush the opposition. Anwar, a former prime minister who was sacked by Mahathir in 1998 and then imprisoned for alleged sodomy and corruption after leading protests against his government, helped smooth Mahathir's acceptance by opposition parties by publicly reconciling with him.

Remarkably robust at 92 years old, Mahathir is welcomed rapturously at opposition rallies and provokes roars of laughter as he mocks Najib as a greedy kleptocrat who would try to buy his way into heaven but would be sent to hell. But the opposition is without an overt attraction for religiously minded voters after an Islamic-based party split from the alliance in 2015, at a time when religious conservatism is gaining ground among Malaysia's Muslims. And loyalty to the National Front remains deeply rooted in the countryside.

"I really think those people talking bad about Najib and 1MDB are only talking nonsense, they're really just jealous and not doing any good. That's all I see," said Mohamad Muda, a 69-year-old fisherman from Pekan in Pahang state. "People can go to the Haj sponsored by 1MDB, every year. So I see that as a benefit," he said. "To go to Haj, I can't afford it without this sponsorship." The government has also pulled out all the stops to ensure it prevails.

Opponents said electoral boundary changes rushed through parliament last month favour the National Front by shifting likely opposition voters into seats where the opposition already prevails. Rights groups said a recently passed law against "fake news" was intended to stifle criticism and debate. Peter Mumford, an analyst with Eurasia Group, a political risk consultancy for investors, said the credibility of Malaysia's institutions has been "torn to pieces" by Najib's election tactics.

Business is comfortable with a National Front victory because they're uncertain about what policies the opposition would introduce, but that victory would come at a longer-term cost, he said, "weakening institutions and leaving the country with more entrenched identity politics."

- AP