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Singapore paper identifies Malaysian leaders with potential

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THE Singapore Straits Times, in a series entitled "Asians to Watch", has identified several Malaysians as potential leaders in the region.

The most prominently featured Malaysian was Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

Other Malaysians mentioned were Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Second Finance Minister Datuk Dr Jamaludin Jarjis and MCA deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek.

The report said most people in Malaysia see Najib as the natural choice for the country's Number Two position when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad makes way for Abdullah in October.

Among other figures in the region featured so far in the on-going series are Taipei mayor Ma Yingjeou, known as Taiwan's "Mr Clean" and Indonesia's much-courted Co-ordinating Minister for People's Welfare, Yusuf Kalla.

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Even Dr Mahathir, it said, had given Najib his stamp of approval, endorsing him in public and appointing him to two high-powered committees.

A father of five, Najib chairs a task force that will implement national service for 450,000 Malaysian youths next year. He also sits on a committee that is handling the overhaul of the education system.

The article noted several "black marks" against Najib. One being his rabble-rousing performance as a Malay nationalist during his tenure as Umno Youth chief.

His strident tone against Chinese groups and political parties in 1987 during a spat over language spooked many non-Malays.

Yet he is also seen by some as "passive and with a tendency to play safe".

But the most devastating hit against him was the slender margin of victory in the last general election when he scraped through by 241 votes in Pekan, a constituency he has "owned" since 1976.

In the Straits Times interview, Najib said the results of the last election showed clearly that Umno had to rejuvenate itself and that the quality and performance of individuals were all important.

"As a person, I don't think I have changed. But I am now conscious of the need as a politician to be more adaptive," he said.

The article said Najib could be near the centre of power in Putrajaya but in Pekan, he was the people's representative, someone they would go to

with all manner of requests - from donations to letters in support of job applications.

They drop in at his kampung-style house and approach him even at the mosque. During the recent fasting month, he visited the constituency eight times, breaking fast at several homes.

On Jamaludin, the article said the next 12 months would be crucial for him.

"If he emerges from his important posting in the Finance Ministry with credit, there is a good chance that the Pahang-born engineer will hold the purse strings of the Government when Dr Mahathir steps down in October.

"His two-year stint as the all-action chairman of national electricity company, Tenaga Nasional Berhad, caught the eye of the Prime Minister and paved the way for his promotion. Now he has to deliver."

As for Abdullah, the article said he would continue injecting merit into the education system, promote English and emphasise corporate governance "because he has acknowledged the man he has shadowed for the past three years is still worth following."

On Lim, the article said his supporters feel his clean-cut, nice-guy reputation will be an advantage in uniting the MCA against beleaguered party president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik.