

Mahathir says Umno has no alternative to Najib

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By Chisaki Watanabe, Bloomberg

BN has no choice but to continue supporting Prime Minister Najib Razak, even after losing a majority of the popular vote in May 5 elections, said Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the nation's former leader.

"I think the party will support him because of a lack of an alternative," Mahathir, 87, said in Tokyo yesterday, speaking at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan.

Najib's governing coalition extended its 55-year rule, winning 133 seats in the 222-member parliament as support for ethnic Chinese component parties in the ruling alliance dwindled.

Ethnic Chinese parties in the government won nine seats compared with 23 in the 2008 election. Najib attributed his coalition's loss in Selangor state assembly vote, where the opposition took 44 out of 56 seats, to a "Chinese tsunami" against the government.

Chinese make up about a quarter of Malaysia's 29 million people, while about 60 percent are Malays and indigenous groups together known as bumiputera, or "sons of the soil," who get preferential treatment in areas like business and education through affirmative action.

The opposition rejected Najib's analysis of the poll outcome in racial terms, a sensitive topic in a country where hundreds were killed in Sino-Malay riots in 1969 after an election.

The results of the election show Malaysia has become more divided than unified, Mahathir said.

"We are still striving to bring the races together," he said, calling unity an "uphill task." "Because of this racial polarisation" Najib couldn't get Chinese votes, he said.

Contesting results

Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim, a former finance minister under BN, has protested the result, holding a series of rallies around the country to allege electoral fraud. He has pledged to contest the results in as many as 30 seats, enough to

swing the overall result.

The Institute for Democracy and Economic affairs, an official election observer, described the poll as "only partially free and not fair" in a May 8 report. Candidates have 21 days from May 23 to file protests. Election Commission chief Abdul Aziz Mohd Yusof said May 5 he was "satisfied" with the voting process.

The margin of victory was even narrower than the 2008 election, after which Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stood down as prime minister to take responsibility.

NONENajib, who took over mid-term four years ago, could face a leadership challenge when his party, Umno, holds its annual assembly later this year. Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin is potentially next in line.

Besides an ethnic divide, Najib's administration faces a weakening economy, with growth slowing to less than 5 percent for the first time in seven quarters. Gross domestic product rose 4.1 percent in the three months through March from a year earlier, after a revised 6.5 percent gain in the previous quarter, the central bank said on May 15.

Mahathir was Malaysia's longest-running prime minister, winning five straight election victories before retiring in 2003 after 22 years in power. The medical doctor sacked Anwar, his heir apparent, at the height of the Asian financial crisis in 1998 after clashing over economic policy.

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