

Abdullah issues vote of confidence in Najib
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Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today delivered full backing to his besieged deputy, ahead of an expected early election.

Najib Abdul Razak has faced scrutiny since the brutal murder last October of a Mongolian national whose ex-lover is a political analyst linked to the deputy premier.

However Abdullah reassured his dominant Umno that he was happy with Najib's performance.

"I want to assure the people that I am confident in the capabilities of my deputy. We have no problems in working together to ensure our party's success," Abdullah told thousands of Umno leaders and members in a speech to mark the party's 61st anniversary.

The analyst, Abdul Razak Baginda, has been charged with abetting in the death of Altantuya Shaariibuu, while two police officers in an elite unit which guards top leaders have been charged with the murder.

They are due to stand trial on June 4.

Many challenges

The case was highlighted by the opposition Parti Keadilan Rakyat in a fiercely fought state by-election last month.

Abdullah noted that Najib "was faced with many challenges" but credited the victory to campaigning by his deputy in the poll, seen as a barometer of the coalition's popularity before a general election.

Malaysia must hold elections by early 2009, but Abdullah is widely expected to call it earlier.

"Although it was a small by-election, the campaign was tough ... My deputy was attacked blatantly on various issues by the opposition, especially by Anwar Ibrahim. But with cooperation of all the component parties, we reaped victory in the end," he said.

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