

Cannon, keris for the new King
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With a blast of cannon fire and the kiss of a keris (dagger), Malaysia's 13th king will be installed tomorrow in a ceremony steeped in traditional Malay customs and pageantry.

Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin, 45, was sworn in to the post in December but will formally take office at a solemn ceremony which comes just once every five years.

The stock market will be closed and civil servants get the day off as the "Yang Di-pertuan Agong," or "He Who Is Made Lord," is installed at the throne room of the national palace, Istana Negara, in Kuala Lumpur.

While his position is largely ceremonial, the king commands great respect from Malaysians, especially the country's majority Malays.

The ceremony will closely follow customs set out in previous coronations, said Minister for Culture, Arts and Heritage Dr Rais Yatim.

"This is really traditional," Rais told AFP.

Malaysia has had an elected monarchy since independence from Britain in 1957. In a unique arrangement the monarch is chosen by, and rotates among, the rulers of the nine Malaysian states still headed by royalty. Four other states are not headed by monarchs.

Second youngest king

Sultan Mizan, the country's second-youngest king ever, is the sultan of Terengganu, which is sending a royal court orchestra to play traditional "sacred, haunting" music during the ceremony, state Bernama news agency said.

The ensemble will strike up as the king and his queen enter the hall and are seated on the thrones.

According to the prime minister's office, Sultan Mizan will be dressed in a black ceremonial robe embroidered in gold, and with its roots in the Middle East. He will also wear long embroidered trousers and a royal head-dress whose origins date back centuries.

In the presence of the country's other sultans and government ministers, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will proclaim Sultan Mizan the 13th king.

His Majesty will then be presented with the "keris panjang diraja", or the royal long dagger, which the king will ceremoniously draw and kiss. With its hilt and sheath covered in gold, the elaborately-engraved kris is a symbol of power and authority.

The king's pledge to perform his duties and protect Islam, the official religion of Malaysia, will be received with cries of "Daulat Tuanku," or "Long live the King."

Twenty-one rounds of cannon fire will sound.

Four-hours to write

Official documents and invitations for the ceremony are written in the traditional Jawi script and prepared by Yayasan Restu, a foundation that specialises in Jawi calligraphy, Bernama reported.

Abdul Baki Abu Bakar, a calligrapher with the foundation, said four ceremonial documents would be written on goat skin parchments.

"Extra care is needed when writing on the parchment because of its smooth oily texture," Bernama quoted Abdul Baki as saying.

"And we use the best waterproof black ink from Japan."

Another calligrapher, Mohammed Fadil, said each invitation letter took four hours to write by hand. The paper is made of cotton and pulp and could last for 500 years, Bernama quoted him as saying.

Sultan Mizan, a father of four, was the youngest Malay ruler when he ascended the Terengganu throne at the age of 36.

Educated in Malaysia and Australia, Sultan Mizan later received training at the British military academy at Sandhurst.

He is a keen sportsman with a passion for horse riding.

Malaysia's king signs bills of law and appoints ministers, judges and ambassadors on the advice of cabinet.

But real power lies with the prime minister. Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad stripped kings of their veto over government bills in 1983.

Malaysia's royal lineage can be traced back to Malay sultanates from the 15th century.

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