

BN to meet as election looms
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The 13 parties in Barisan Nasional coalition will meet this weekend to thrash out plans to avoid a repeat of the electoral drubbing they suffered two years ago.

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak does not have to call fresh elections until 2013 but speculation is intensifying that he will call snap polls early next year, after a series of by-elections wins that boosted his confidence.

The coalition, led by the dominant Umno which represents majority Malays, as well as 12 other race-based parties, has ruled the country since independence but was walloped in 2008 polls.

Large numbers of Chinese and Indian voters swung to a resurgent opposition led by Anwar Ibrahim, helping it deprive the coalition of its usual two-thirds majority in parliament.

"The BN convention meeting this year is mainly for planning for the general elections," a senior Umno official told AFP.

"The various component parties are all working on strategies on how to ensure we win back what was lost in the last elections," he added.

Najib, who came to power last year, said the 2008 polls were "a sobering, albeit painful wake-up call" but that the coalition had now clawed back some support.

"For the first time in history (BN) lost five states to the opposition as well as our two-thirds majority in parliament," the Star daily quoted him as saying Friday.

"But in the last 18 months, the ruling coalition had undergone significant transformation and the 13 political parties that make up the coalition have made great strides in changing and winning back the hearts of the people."

Officials say a key agenda item at the convention is a plan to change the coalition's membership rules to allow voters to join it directly, instead of a particular component party - a measure aimed at attracting minorities.

"Many individuals or organisations don't want to affiliate themselves with traditional partisan politics so they feel they can contribute as part of the BN which has had a proven track record," said influential political blogger Zakhir Mohammad.

"They want to be part of that," he told AFP, adding that a recent bout of factional brawling in the opposition has meanwhile dented its image as an alternative government.

"The opposition has a lot of internal issues so many Malay and non-Malay voters who supported them appear to be moving towards BN, which provides a more stable image," he added.

- AFP

