

**Elections expected to clip government's wings**  
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Malaysians today voted in general election expected to hand the ruling coalition another victory but with a reduced majority, as ethnic Chinese and Indians shift to the opposition. MCPX

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi won a landslide victory in 2004 polls, but now faces public anger over high inflation, rising crime rates and ethnic tensions in the multicultural nation.

Asked when he cast his vote whether the Barisan Nasional coalition, led by Malays who dominate the population, would retain a critical two-thirds majority in parliament, he said only: "Insya-Allah (God willing)."

Pollsters say the opposition, rallied by former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim who has stormed back onto the political stage after being sacked and jailed in 1998, could double its presence to 40 seats in the new 222-seat parliament.

But they say the three opposition parties, which have formed a loose alliance, are unlikely to claim the 75 seats they need to prevent the coalition from amending the constitution at will.

Voting ended at 5pm and preliminary results are expected within hours.

Rights monitors and opposition leaders have warned that the coalition, which has ruled for half a century, may manipulate the vote in tightly fought seats, but Abdullah rejected those allegations Saturday.

"Enough of that. They are just looking for excuses in the event they do not win," he said in his Kepala Batas constituency in the island state of Penang, where he arrived dressed in the blue of the Barisan Nasional.

### **Clash in Terengganu**

Concerns over electoral fraud triggered a clash between supporters of the Islamic party PAS and police in northern Terengganu state, with authorities using tear gas to disperse some 300 people. Twenty-two people were arrested.

Police chief Musa Hassan said the incident occurred after PAS supporters stopped several buses and cars which they suspected were ferrying in "phantom voters" for the coalition.

When police intervened, the crowd pelted police vehicles with rocks.

"The PAS supporters threw stones at police vehicles, forcing the police to release tear gas to control the situation," he said.

Elsewhere in Penang, Anwar cast his vote at the Permatang Pauh constituency held by his wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail who formally heads their Keadilan party.

The charismatic 60-year-old is banned from holding public office until April but plans to re-enter Parliament within months by contesting his wife's seat in a by-election.

Anwar said he was convinced the opposition could break the government's two-thirds majority, but he was concerned that electoral fraud could skew the result.

"We shall shake this government this time," he told reporters. "Now the Malays, Chinese and the Indians support us. We should teach these cheaters a lesson."

Malaysia's minority ethnic Chinese and Indians are concerned over the "Islamisation" of the country and Indian activists held rare protests last year claiming decades of discrimination.

A major battleground in the election is the northern state of Kelantan, the only state the Barisan Nasional (BN) does not hold and which it is hoping to snatch from the Islamic party in power there for 18 years.

"I am very confident of winning if there is real democracy in Malaysia and there is transparency in the system," Kelantan chief minister Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat said as he cast his ballot in the state capital Kota Bharu.

"PAS should retain control because we have done a good job, honoured God's word and carried out Islamic doctrines," said Niz Aziz, who is also the spiritual leader of the fundamentalist Islamic party.

Dressed in his trademark white flowing robes and turban, he warned against a vote for the coalition, which has promised billions of dollars in development funds for the impoverished state.

"If BN takes control, they will dismantle everything we have done and there will be mixing of the sexes and the removal of halal practices," he said.

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