

Nation's political landscape dramatically transformed
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Malaysia's political landscape was dramatically transformed after the government slumped to its worst ever election results, losing its two-thirds majority and four states to a buoyant opposition. MCPX

The stunning rebuke suffered by the Barisan Nasional coalition, which has ruled for half a century, put a serious question mark over the future of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who faced angry calls to quit.

His government was punished over rising inflation and the mishandling of racial tensions, in a result that for the first time in four decades deprives the coalition of its ability to change the constitution at will.

A visibly exhausted Abdullah said the coalition could still form the next government, but conceded yesterday's election could be a vote of no-confidence in his leadership, which has been criticised as weak and ineffective.

"Maybe. There are a lot of messages from the people," he told reporters at the headquarters of his Umno party.

He said there was "no pressure at this time" to resign, and his spokesman later insisted he had no intention of quitting.

"He has actually received quite a lot of support from senior party leaders and he is still on track to be sworn in tomorrow," spokesman Kamal Khalid told AFP.

"The PM was surprised by the losses... but having said that, although the government has not received a two-thirds majority, it was very close and the BN can still form the government," his spokesman insisted.

Umno leadership turmoil

Opposition leader and former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, who has made a spectacular political comeback since his 1998 sacking and imprisonment, was jubilant.

"It is a new dawn for Malaysia," he told AFP, saying it defeated the "myth" that Abdullah's Umno party which leads the coalition was invincible.

"I can see some leadership turmoil happening in Umno," he said. "They will have to reinvent by focusing on leadership change."

Veteran leader Mahathir Mohamad, who ruled for two decades before handing over to his chosen successor Abdullah in 2003, accused the prime minister of "destroying" the coalition and suggested he should quit.

"I think he should accept responsibility for this. He should accept 100 percent responsibility," he said. "I am sorry but I apparently made the wrong choice."

While Malaysia's minorities had been expected to abandon the government, pollsters said the coalition also suffered a loss of support from the majority Muslim Malays who form its bedrock.

Bridget Welsh, a Southeast Asian expert at Johns Hopkins University in the United States who is here for the elections, said the result represented a "profound transformation" for Malaysia.

"Abdullah's administration did not fulfil the promises for which he had a phenomenal mandate when he came into office, and this is the main reason he's lost a tremendous amount of support," she said.

Welsh said the challenge would now be for the disparate opposition parties to put aside their differences and work in harmony, particularly in the state parliaments where they will mostly form coalitions.

Victory rallies banned

Barisan Nasional won 137 seats in the new 222-seat assembly.

Anwar's PKR won 31 seats, the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) won 28 and the Islamic party PAS won 23.

The opposition held a total of just 20 seats in the outgoing parliament, which Abdullah won in a landslide victory in 2004 in a burst of goodwill after taking over from Mahathir.

In an unprecedented result, the states of Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor are now in opposition hands, while PAS extended its hold on Kelantan which it had ruled with a thin majority.

Bernama news agency said PAS would appoint chief ministers in Kedah and Perak while a DAP figure will preside in Penang and a PKR chief minister will run Selangor.

Barisan Nasional last surrendered its two-thirds majority in 1969, in a result that was followed by serious racial clashes.

The government urged calm today and police banned victory celebrations or any incidents that "can threaten national security."

Economists said the upset election results would reverberate in the stock market and could dampen investor confidence.