

**Mahathir may return to centre stage**  
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Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's planned stepping down in March 2009 may well see a return to the authoritarian rule familiar to Malaysians during the 22-year iron rule of his predecessor Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

For one thing, Abdullah will be handing over power to his deputy Najib Razak who has been waiting in the wings ever since Mahathir retired in November 003.

"Mr Najib is a carbon copy of Dr Mahathir and we fear in his rise to power a possible return of iron-fisted rule and intolerance for dissent and curbs on he political opposition," said a diplomat with a European mission, on condition of anonymity.

Najib, an economist by training, has vast experience in government and politics but has always been in the shadow of Mahathir and Abdullah.

mahathir pak lah angry 190508His views and policies on dissent, human rights and the political opposition re relatively unknown.

Critics said Najib's rise to power would also see the return of Mahathir to political centre stage, probably as a tenured advisor to the government.

"I welcome the departure of Abdullah and am ready to give advice to the new overnment," Mahathir told local reporters after confirming that Abdullah as leaving.

**Still a well liked figure**

Abdullah, who failed to carry out the major reforms he had promised in 2004, has promised to implement at least three reforms before he leaves in March but civil society activists are not excited by his promise.

Abdullah said he would not abolish the draconian Internal Security Act, which allows for detention without trial, but will see to the setting up of an independent commission to select judges, an independent oversight ommission to curb police corruption and abuse and place the Anti-Corruption Agency under an independent commission and give it more bite.

"He should carry out these reforms in the short time he has," veteran opposition lawmaker Lim Kit Siang told IPS. "If he is serious and if he gets racking we will cooperate with him and he would be assured of a permanent legacy and will be remembered well."

Although Abdullah failed to carry out the promised reforms he remained a well liked figure among the people who understood that he could not act because he was under siege from within and outside.

umno supreme council special meeting 260809 najib"While most Malaysians welcome Najib, they also feel sad that Abdullah is leaving," said Ramon Navaratnam, a former senior Finance Ministry official who is now the president of Transparency International, Malaysia.

"He was a most likable and affable leader but he was rather unhurried about his job. He delayed reforms and was indecisive and that got him into trouble with the people," he told IPS. Although Abdullah's decision to leave has etled the succession battle in his ruling United Malay National Organisation (Umno) party it is unlikely to end the larger political battle between a resurgent opposition led by former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim and a considerably weakened Barisan Nasional ruling coalition.

Political analysts say the tussle would worsen because Abdullah's choice, Najib Razak, and the iconic opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, are arch-rivals for political power.

Abdullah rose up the ranks of Umno but was well liked and in the shadows during the 22 years when Mahathir held sway. Mahathir had said last year he picked Abdullah as a "temporary substitute" to hold the seat for Najib.

"Abdullah would be remembered as a pleasant man who simply did not have the skills or the gumption to rule," said a Chinese newspaper editor who declined to be identified. "He tried to please everybody and in the end failed to please anybody."

Najib Razak and Altantuya murder case Najib was only 22 when he entered politics after the death of his father, revered second prime minister Abdul Razak, in 1976. He became the country's youngest minister two years later.

But his standing has been damaged by links to the 2006 murder of a Mongolian woman with whom he allegedly had an affair. Anwar also accused him of receiving kickbacks on defence deals he had handled.

Najib denied the allegations and swore on the Koran that he had never met Altantuya Shaariibuu, a former model who was blown up with C4 explosives.

### **'Unmitigated disaster'**

Reacting to the developments Anwar said it would be an "unmitigated disaster" for Malaysia if Najib became prime minister.

"Najib has given no indication of his commitment to judicial reform and corruption. These are issues that the Malaysian people expressed deep concerns over," he said.

"Malaysians fear that under Najib, democratic freedoms will be curtailed and the use of draconian laws such as the ISA would be extended," Anwar said. He also referred to "unanswered questions" over alleged defence contract kickbacks and the Shaariibuu murder.

Anwar Ibrahim pakatan rakyat september 16 announcement pc 160908 02 "He [Najib] takes over at a very difficult time for Malaysia, with political and economic turmoil on the rise and with all previously accepted norms now under attack," said Navaratnam.

"He has the experience and Umno backing, but he is under a cloud over the Mongolian affair," he added. "His performance as national leader would be affected unless the controversy is cleared up."

Foreign diplomats say Najib's immediate tasks included getting a grip on the sliding economy, reassuring foreign investors and easing rising ethnic tensions.

"He really has some big and complex issues to deal with," said the European diplomat.

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