

Najib declared new party leader
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Deputy prime minister Najib Razak - the son and nephew of two former PMs - has been officially declared president of Umno, a role that will make him the country's next leader.

In an uncontested transition that has been planned for several months, Najib was appointed president of Umno which leads the Barisan Nasional coalition of race-based parties.

"For the post of Umno president, Najib Razak won uncontested," Umno permanent chairman Onn Ismail said at the party's annual meeting, where delegates are voting for a range of top positions.

No date has been set for the formal transition of power from Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, but Najib is expected to be sworn in by the king on April 3.

Meanwhile, voting for the positions of Umno deputy president, three vice-presidents and 25 supreme council positions was completed at 3.15pm.

The contest for number two will see a straight fight between current vice-president Muhyiddin Yassin and party information chief Muhammad Muhd Taib.

The voting process commenced some 30 minutes after the president's speech, which ended at about 11.45am.

Results of the crucial ballot will be announced close late tonight.

Najib suffers setback

Najib has promised a radical overhaul of Umno, but commentators say his political baggage - including low popularity ratings and unsubstantiated allegations of corruption and links to a sensational murder - will weaken his position.

He suffered a setback yesterday when Abdullah's son-in-law, 33-year-old Khairy Jamaluddin, seized the position of chief of Umno's youth wing - a nurturing ground for future leaders.

In another high-profile contest, former cabinet minister and political veteran Rafidah Aziz was knocked out as leader of Umno's women's wing, in favour of her deputy Shahrizat Jalil, who is another ally of Abdullah.

"Khairy's win was an upset," political analyst Khoo Kay Peng said. "It has disrupted the power balance within Najib's team. He definitely wanted people from his own faction."

Najib faces a final test late today when the results of the vote for his new deputy are announced. He is reputed to favour trade minister Muhyiddin Yassin but the race is believed to be very tight.