

**New PM faces rough ride**  
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The country's new premier, the urbane Najib Razak, faces an enormous task to rebuild the shattered ruling party and win back the support of voters who deserted it at elections a year ago.

The son and nephew of two former prime ministers, the 55-year-old who was today declared president of the Umno has considerable political pedigree.

But the veteran party operative, who is expected to be sworn in as prime minister next week, also carries heavy baggage that pundits say could make an already difficult job even more tricky.

And there are fears that baggage - including low popularity ratings and unsubstantiated allegations of corruption and links to a sensational murder - may see his administration revert to hardline tactics.

Political analyst Shahrudin Badaruddin said he expected Najib to model himself on his father, Abdul Razak, who took over after 1969 race riots that inflicted a deep wound on the multicultural nation.

"Abdul Razak was seen as being hardline in his policies and restoring order to the country," the analyst told AFP.

"But if Najib takes this position, it will not do him any favours as the people and the political climate is not the same as back then."

Currently deputy premier, Najib is the longest-serving cabinet minister having entered politics aged 23 after the 1976 death in office of his father, who was the country's second prime minister.

In line with the Umno tradition of uncontested transitions, Najib has long been heir apparent to Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, but one recent poll showed only 41 percent of voters believe he will make a good leader.

Najib has been forced to repeatedly deny any involvement in the 2006 killing of Mongolian woman Altantuya Shaariibuu, the lover of one of his close aides, whose body was blown up with military-grade explosives.

While there is no evidence Najib was involved, the case continues to captivate Malaysians and critics say that the many unanswered questions should be probed in an official investigation.

The opposition has also accused Najib of involvement in the alleged payment of large commissions to close associates for the purchases of two submarines and 18 fighter jets - charges the government has denied.

He assumes power at a time of crisis for the Malaysian economy, which risks slipping into recession this year.

**Led failed campaigns in two by-elections**

And he also personally headed the government's failed campaigns for two by-elections, seen as a barometer for the public mood since the Umno-led coalition lost unprecedented ground in March 2008 elections.

Mild-mannered and always dressed immaculately, Najib took a degree in economics at the University of Nottingham in Britain before returning home in the mid-1970s to take key posts at the central bank and

the national oil firm.

He also held several cabinet posts in the 1980s and 1990s, modernising the military as defence minister before becoming deputy premier in January 2004.

Although Najib was a contender for the premiership before, former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad chose Abdullah in 2003 - a choice Mahathir later said he regretted after he fell out with his successor.

Abdullah, who has allowed more openness in Malaysian society, on today warned Umno members in his last speech as leader not to revert to the authoritarian era of Mahathir.

But many expressed a yearning for the past, when the party reigned supreme.

"I think Najib will return Umno to its glory days. He will lead Umno to regain political dominance," said Mohsin Yusoff, the party's youth chief in Perlis.

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

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