

**BN faces critical by-election test**  
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The Barisan Nasional government faces a by-election next month which analysts say will be a critical test of public reaction to its reform promises after disastrous polls in March.

The by-election in Terengganu, a battleground between the ruling Umno and the Islamic opposition party PAS, was triggered by the death of a deputy minister.

Election Commission deputy chairman Wan Ahmad Wan Omar announced today that the by-election would be held on Jan 17, with parties to declare their candidates on Jan 6.

After wrangles in the past over allegations of fraud and vote-buying, Wan Ahmad said that Mafrel (Malaysians for Free Elections) would be allowed to monitor the process.

"We like having Mafrel as observers as it boosts the confidence of people and transparency," he told a press conference.

The vote comes at an unfortunate time for Umno, which leads the BN coalition that was humbled in March elections - losing a third of parliamentary seats and five states to the three-member opposition alliance.

**BN in a state of disarray**

Since then it has been in a state of disarray that is unlikely to be resolved until its annual assembly next March, when deputy prime minister Najib Razak is expected to replace unpopular premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Infighting and rivalries helped it lose an August by-election that allowed opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim to return to parliament - a decade after he was sacked as deputy premier and jailed on sex and corruption charges.

Analysts said Umno faces a tough by-election battle against PAS, which along with Anwar's PKR and the predominantly Chinese DAP makes up the opposition alliance.

"It will be a classic battle between two Malay political parties in a Malay heartland," said James Chin, professor of political science at the Kuala Lumpur campus of Monash university.

"If PAS wins it means the people do not believe Umno's reform programme. It means their sentiments against the ruling party since the March elections are still there," he said.

"It could also demonstrate that voters do not have confidence in Najib Razak's leadership and believe that Umno is not capable of any reform."

**Najib to lead BN campaign**

Najib, who as deputy premier will direct the ruling party's election campaign, has promised to make good on Abdullah's promises of change, which were never realised after he came to power in 2003.

But there are doubts whether the Umno, which has become plagued by corruption in the half-century it has dominated Malaysian politics, is capable of undergoing the changes that voters are demanding.

The party won the vacant seat of Kuala Terengganu in March, but only with the slimmest of majorities.

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