

**By-election is DPM's first major test**  
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Campaigning kicked off today in a critical by-election seen as a test of the Barisan Nasional government's popularity since disastrous losses in national polls last year.

"We must ensure we win this election. We must regain our political strength and influence," said Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak (far left in photo), who is leading the campaign for the Jan 17 vote in Kuala Terengganu.

The government is hoping to show it has clawed back support with promises of reform and leadership changes after losing five states and a third of parliamentary seats in the March 2008 general election.

For the opposition alliance, it is a chance to show its support is holding up and that it is working effectively, despite government claims that the partnership of three very different parties is already cracking up.

The by-election is the first major test for Najib, who is due to take over the top job in March. Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was forced to agree to step aside in the fallout from the national elections.

The campaign for the seat of Kuala Terengganu - previously held by a government deputy minister who died in November - got under way today amid extremely tight security.

About 25,000 supporters from both sides faced off across metal barricades manned by police in full riot gear, among a 1,000-strong contingent guarding a stadium where the candidates were announced.

**Najib tells Umno to close ranks**

At a rally late yesterday, Najib urged his ruling party Umno to abandon the rivalries that have damaged its performance in past polls, and close ranks to ensure victory in a vote pundits say could go either way.

"This is not a time to advance our own agenda," he said.

"We are weak. Our soul is weak. Let's pray to God to give us victory. Let's all pray to ask God to give us confidence to battle this election."

The government candidate, Wan Ahmad Farid, 46, is a controversial choice. The deputy home minister is from a wealthy family in Terengganu and has been criticised as having little grassroots experience.

The opposition is putting forward Mohamad Abdul Wahid from the Islamic party PAS. The 52-year-old is virtually unknown outside the state, but has an unblemished record and a history of wins in past state-level polls.

Opposition supporters chanted "Allahu Akbar" (God is great) and unfurled gigantic banners outside the nomination centre, which was locked down by police, who brought in water

cannon trucks in case of clashes.

PAS members were joined by contingents from its alliance partners, the Chinese-dominated DAP and the multiracial PKR, which represents Muslim Malays as well as ethnic Chinese and Indians.

"Umno is full of cheats and abuses the people," said opposition supporter Ismail Abdullah, a 40-year-old street vendor. "PAS champions Islam, it is against cruelty and corruption."

### **PM-in-waiting under tremendous pressure**

The opposition is highlighting grievances against big-ticket projects in Terengganu, including the Monsoon Cup international yachting event, which they say have brought no benefits to local people.

But others said that only Umno, which has dominated Malaysian politics for half a century, can bring prosperity to Terengganu.

"PAS only champions the Islamic religion. We need to balance religion with development. Our children need employment, and now many are forced to migrate to other states for jobs," said 26-year-old Mohamad Azuari.

Ibrahim Suffian, a pollster from the Merdeka Centre research firm, said the winning margin was likely to be just one or two percent, and that the small ethnic Chinese community in the state could swing the result.

Recent inflammatory comments from Umno figures, including a proposal to shut down Chinese and Indian vernacular schools in Malaysia, would not help their chances, he said.

"If Umno loses it will put Najib under tremendous pressure and he will be hard fought to explain the results to the party," he said.

Najib played down the significance of the poll, which is also seen as a test of the Umno's strained relationship with Malays, who dominate the population and have been its bedrock in the past.

"There is a tendency to see this election as a yardstick for the PM (and) for me... but it is actually about the people choosing a good MP," he said.