

**Win or lose, it's a rocky road for Najib**  
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Come March, Najib Abdul Razak will assume the position of prime minister. But unlike his predecessors, the Umno stalwart will be inheriting a severely bruised administration.

And even before taking office, the premier-in-waiting is facing a litmus test in the form of the Jan 17 Kuala Terengganu by-election.

Speaking at the Regional Outlook Forum in Singapore today, sacked Umno leader Zaid Ibrahim shared his views on the political future of Barisan Nasional and the incoming premier.

Touching on next Saturday's by-election, the former law minister said: "BN will probably lose and if that happens, life will be tough for Najib. If BN wins then it's only a temporary reprieve."

najib finance ministry pc 220908 02However, he said the ruling coalition, following the installation of a new captain, will appear to be stronger, thanks to the hype and spin by the mainstream media.

"Umno and BN will rally behind him as a show of solidarity," he said, but on the same note warned that when a prime minister is coerced into relinquishing his post, there would be trouble.

"When you dump and push out a sitting prime minister, especially someone as nice as Pak Lah (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi), there are bound to be some of his supporters who will retaliate and Najib cannot as such be assured of unanimous or cohesive support. After all, his popularity is low in the country."

**Emulate Dr M's style**

In view of this, Zaid predicted that Najib might tighten the screws on the media, which had found greater breathing space under the current administration, as well as on dissenters within the party.

"He will be tempted to emulate Dr M's (former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad) style of governance."

Mahathir, who ruled the nation for 22 years, had been accused by critics of being an autocratic leader, during whose tenure, numerous rights were violated, the media shackled and dissidents jailed.

The 82-year-old strongman, who was instrumental in Abdullah's premature exodus from the administrative capital, is also regarded as the political mentor of the incoming prime minister.

Meanwhile, Zaid also said Najib will probably assemble a younger team for his cabinet when he comes into power.

"To do so, he will have to disband half of the present crop of ministers, who have in any event certainly passed their shelf life. There are many young leaders in Umno and BN who are capable technocrats but, more importantly, they are not the typical Umno ideologues and are more moderate in their positions."

Citing Abdullah's son-in-law and Umno Youth chief hopeful Khairy Jamaluddin as an example, Zaid said the 32-year-old Oxford graduate is "capable and has enough gumption to effect changes the new government may need to effect".

"He could be a star in the future, if he is not buried or sidelined in March (Umno elections)."

He also named Entrepreneur Development Deputy Minister Saifuddin Abdullah as one of the "bright BN second liners".

On the other hand, Zaid said if Najib persists with the so-called 'Umno tradition' of giving cabinet posts to those who hold senior party positions, then the BN government will be more of the same.

"I also believe that MCA and the other component parties will continue to play the role they have developed after their calamitous showing in the last general elections. In the wake of their defeat, they became more assertive and less afraid to highlight the plight of the minorities."

"The dominance of one party to the exclusion of others is over; although Umno extremists will try hard to hang on to the advantage they have become accustomed through bullying."

"All these elements should allow the BN administration a small window for a new lease of life if it plays its cards right."

### **Abdullah's important legacy**

Focusing on the outgoing prime minister, Zaid noted that Abdullah has been the butt of many jokes and criticisms from all quarters.

However, he said it should not be overlooked that it was Abdullah's manifesto of change which garnered the ruling coalition its best ever election results in 2004.

"He had also begun to move towards the reforms he had promised, showing earnestness in making transparency, integrity and good governance a reality.

"Sadly, he was impeded by extremist elements in Umno and he was too weak to take them on. If Umno had supported him with earnest, the March 2008 swing might not have happened."

Zaid warned that it will be a fatal mistake for Umno and BN if Najib reversed or paid mere lip-service to the initiatives set in place by his predecessor.

"Integrity, good governance and judicial reform, in any meaningful sense, had been missing from our political lexicon for a long time. It took courage for Pak Lah to not only reintroduce them but to take steps towards giving them substance.

"The establishing of the Institute of Integrity, the Judicial Appointments Commission and the

Anti-Corruption Commission, all of which could have been better tailored to their purpose and declared aims, signalled the need for a massive change of direction – a paradigm shift, if you will – in political governance.

"Will these efforts herald a new era in anti-corruption efforts as well as allow for more meaningful efforts to restore judicial independence and competence? Only Najib can answer."

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