

Najib faces first test as campaign kicks off
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Incoming premier Najib Abdul Razak faced the first test of his leadership today, as campaigns were launched for three by-elections seen as a barometer of his popularity.

Najib was declared leader of the ruling party Umno on today, promising to introduce radical reforms after disastrous polls a year ago that jeopardised the Umno-led coalition's half-century grip on power.

But he faces a difficult task, coming to power as the economy slides towards recession, and burdened by political baggage including low public support and attempts to link him to corruption and a sensational murder.

The by-elections on April 7 will provide a snapshot of the public mood, and show whether Umno has been able to claw back support with its plans to tackle corruption and infighting.

Najib's new deputy, Muhyiddin Yassin (left), kicked off the campaign in the hotspot electorate of Bukit Gantang in Perak, where parties registered candidates for the seat in Parliament that is up for grabs.

"All by-elections are important, especially one that is done after the process of transition of leadership... we want to tell the people this is a team that means business," he told reporters.

bukit gantang nomination day candidates and vips 290309 02Apart from Umno's Ismail Safian and PAS' Mohd Nizar Jamaluddin, an independent, Kamarul Ramizu Idris, has joined the fray.

Tough fight in Sarawak

Some 15,000 government and opposition supporters turned out for nomination day in the semi-rural district, putting on a rowdy display as they beat on drums, yelled chants and waved party banners.

The other votes are for seats in state parliaments - one in Kedah and one in Sarawak which until now has been a stronghold of the Umno-led coalition.

The state seats of Bukit Selambau (Kedah) will see a mammoth 15-cornered contest while Batang Ai (Sarawak) is a straight fight.

Ibrahim Suffian (right) from the Merdeka Centre, an independent polling organisation, said the Sarawak seat would be a tough battle, but that the opposition had a good chance of winning the other two contests.

"Losses will put Najib under some pressure because there's a lot of hope in him to fix the party and turn around the electoral fortunes," he told AFP.

"So if they don't win then he has to really think of different ways to regain voter confidence."

bukit gantang by election nomination day crowd shots 290309 05The opposition - which won a third of seats in parliament and five of Malaysia's 13 states in an unprecedented result in March 2008 elections - has tried to lower expectations.

"We will work very hard, we are confident but we are also realistic that we are facing tough odds and we know Najib's tactics - intimidation, fraud, corruption, bribery," opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim said last week.

Najib plays down potential ramifications

Najib has also tried to play down the ramifications of the electoral clash, likely to take place just days after the formal transition of power from Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi which is rumoured to be on April 3.

"The press are making it a referendum all the time," Najib said on yesterday at the end of Umno's annual meeting, where delegates also selected a new leadership to serve under him.

"It is very hard to say how much (the results) will reflect national considerations. One has to be guarded. We are approaching the by elections with renewed vigour. We will do our level best."

As the son and nephew of two former prime ministers, 55-year-old Najib has an impeccable political pedigree. But he also carries heavy baggage that pundits say could hamper his efforts to reform the party.

bukit gantang by election nomination day crowd shots 290309 07But pundits say that because he comes to office burdened with handicaps - including the opposition's attempts to link him to a murdered Mongolian woman who was the mistress of one of his aides - his administration could be tempted to revert to hardline tactics.

Najib hit out at those predictions yesterday, saying he was being prejudged before he even takes office.

"They are malicious, baseless lies. I have given my replies but they persist because it is a ploy by the opposition," he said.

"Give me a chance, judge me by my actions, don't judge me on rumours and baseless allegations. I will reform and I will make changes, I am aware that the people expect me to do certain things."