

**Murder case has sullied Najib's image: analyst**  
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Analysts say incoming prime minister Najib Abdul Razak faces an enormous challenge to rejuvenate ruling party Umno and cushion the country from the worst effects of the global meltdown.

He faces his first big test next Tuesday with three by-elections that will be seen as a referendum on support for his fledgling leadership.

"He will inherit a divided party with trust in the government at its lowest ebb and a strong opposition," political analyst Shahrudin Badaruddin told AFP earlier.

He said Najib's challenge would be "to unite the fractured elements of the party."

Najib has an impeccable pedigree as the son and nephew of two former prime ministers, but he has been dogged by controversy and Shahrudin said he had to stem the allegations against him.

He has repeatedly denied opposition allegations connecting him to the 2006 slaying of the mistress of his close aide - a Mongolian woman whose body was blown up with military-grade explosives.

"He must end all the rumours and allegations about the Mongolian case once and for all," Shahrudin said.

"It has affected his image locally and internationally," he added. "As long as these rumours persist, it will make it hard for him to do what needs to be done."

### **Entered politics at 23**

Najib, 55, who is the longest serving cabinet minister, entered politics at 23 after the 1976 death in office of his father Abdul Razak, the country's second prime minister.

Mild-mannered and always impeccably dressed, he took a degree in economics at the University of Nottingham in England before returning to Malaysia in the mid-1970s to take on key posts at the central bank and the national oil firm.

A nephew of the nation's third premier Hussein Onn, Najib held a number of cabinet posts in the 1980s and 1990s, during which he modernised the military as defence minister before becoming deputy premier in January 2004.

His path to the premiership was all but cleared last week when Abdullah - who had been criticised as weak and ineffective during his six years in office - handed him the Umno leadership.

Abdullah, 66, announced his retirement plan last October after coming under heavy fire for the election debacle, when the opposition won an unprecedented one third of seats in parliament.

"I think Najib's promises to improve the economy will mean nothing until he clears his reputation which is marred by scandal," veteran opposition lawmaker Lim Kit Siang told AFP.

UMNO leads the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, which has ruled Malaysia for more than half a century since the former colony gained independence from Britain in 1957.

The coalition of race-based parties -- which also represent ethnic Chinese and Indian communities -- were mauled by the opposition led by former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim.

The opposition seized an unprecedented one third of seats in parliament and now controls three states.

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