

Fraud fears cast cloud over Malaysian election

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in Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's National Front coalition government could face a tough time after today's general election whether it does well or not.

A solid victory could provoke allegations that it had resorted to electoral fraud to preserve its overwhelming parliamentary majority, while a weaker than expected result could undermine support for Abdullah Badawi, the prime minister, within the government's dominant party, the United Malays National Organisation.

Although the National Front is certain to be returned to office, attention will focus on its margin of victory. The coalition gained 90 per cent of parliamentary seats in the last election in 2004.

Anwar Ibrahim, the main opposition leader, says the government is in danger of losing its two-thirds majority, the threshold needed to change the constitution, but claims that it might manipulate the outcome in tightly contested districts. "The future looks promising but there are issues of phantom voters," he said yesterday, referring to the alleged prac-

tice of people using the identity of deceased voters to cast ballots.

Fears of ballot-stuffing were raised this week when the country's election commission, which the opposition claims is biased in favour of the government, suddenly dropped a plan to use indelible ink on voters' fingers to stop people voting more than once. The commission said it had uncovered a plot by the opposition "to sabotage" the election process by smuggling the ink to remote rural areas, where the government is strong, and tricking village people into believing their

fingers had to be marked before going to the polls. The opposition denied the allegations.

Berish, an opposition-led group promoting electoral reforms, said it might stage new protests after the election if it considered the results unfair. The group in November mounted the biggest street demonstration in years to press for changes.

Most informal polls by independent organisations suggest the opposition could double its representation to 40 seats in the expanded 222-member parliament.

"The best-case scenario for the government is if it loses

30 seats and the worst-case would be the loss of 60 seats," said Yang Razali Kassim at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

A senior aide to Mr Abdullah suggested that the loss of 35-40 seats would be "acceptable" and would pose no danger to the prime minister's standing given that the 2004 election was the biggest victory for the National Front since independence in 1957.

But analysts believe that the loss of 40 or more seats could make Mr Abdullah vulnerable to a challenge by rivals at the Umno party

elections later this year.

"The general election is really just a prelude to the Umno election, which is more important since it determines the leadership of the government," said Manu Bhaskaran, of the Centennial Group, an economic consultancy.

The government is hoping to recapture Kelantan, the only one of Malaysia's 13 states in opposition hands. "If the National Front succeeds in gaining Kelantan, it provides an immunity card for (the prime minister) to balance any unexpected losses," said the Abdullah aide.