

Malaysia election blow for Abdullah

FT- 10/3/2008

Ruling party's worst showing for 50 years

Defiant premier faces revolt over leadership

By John Burton in Kuala Lumpur

Abdullah Badawi, the Malaysian prime minister, vowed yesterday not to resign in spite of the long-running National Front government suffering its biggest election setback since independence in 1957.

He rejected a call by Mahathir Mohamad, his predecessor, to step down. "Mahathir's demand is the start of a bloody leadership fight," said Bridget Welsh, a Malaysian political analyst at Johns Hopkins University, near Washington, DC.

Even if Mr Abdullah is appointed today by the king to form a new government, he faces a challenge this year when the United Malays National Organisation, the dominant government party, is scheduled to hold party elections. He could face a revolt unless he resigns before then.

In the weekend election, the government lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time since 1969, gaining 138 seats in the expanded 222-member parliament, with some results still to be declared. The opposition had won 82 seats, far better than analysts had predicted.

A coalition of the three main opposition parties took an unprecedented five state governments, including Penang, Selangor, Perak and Kedah, and Kuala Lumpur, the capital, while keeping control of Kelantan.

"This is a defining moment, unprecedented in our history. The people have voted decisively

for a new era," said Anwar Ibrahim, the opposition leader. The change in the political landscape could unsettle the Kuala Lumpur stock market today because of questions about political stability. It also raises questions over the future of the government's economic policy, including the creation of special economic zones and a mooted cut in fuel subsidies to reduce the large budget deficit.

The extent of the opposition's success was unexpected in what had been a low-key campaign dominated by issues such as corruption, rising inflation and

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crime rates and increased social tensions between the ethnic Malay majority and Chinese and Indian minorities.

"Abdullah paid the price for failing to deliver what he had promised, particularly a clean government," said a foreign diplomat in Kuala Lumpur.

The weekend polls reversed Mr Abdullah's performance in 2004 when he led the National Front



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AFP

to take 90 per cent of parliament seats on a reform programme.

The ethnic Malay-dominated government fell victim to a simultaneous assault from the two main centres of opposition:

the Chinese-based Democratic Action party and conservative muslim Malays represented by Pas. The two parties had agreed to join an alliance engineered by Mr Anwar, whose People's Jus-

tice party has strong support among the urban middle class and emerged as the largest opposition party with 31 seats.

Analysts said there was also a sharp last-minute swing among the government's core ethnic Malay base to the opposition. There had been predictions that Malay voters would rally to the government as minority voters were expected to defect to the

opposition in protest at the government's preferential treatment of the Malay majority in terms of state jobs and university places.

"This looks like a revolution. The people have risen and are united. The message to government is, 'Enough is enough'," said Husam Musa, the Pas vice-president.