

Abdullah faces crucial few days

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MALAYSIA POLLS

The governing coalition's election setback could enable reformers to challenge the leadership, writes John Burton

"Apres moi le déluge" could be the motto for Abdullah Badawi as he was sworn in yesterday for a second term as Malaysian prime minister, ignoring calls for his resignation in the wake of the National Front coalition government's worst election setback in 50 years.

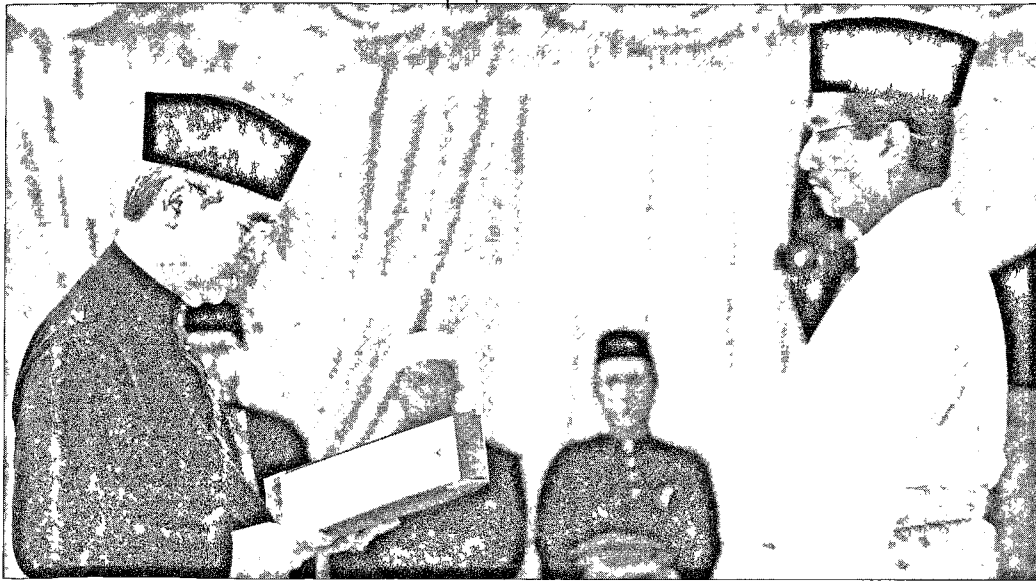
Mr Abdullah might be hoping that he can hold on to office with the argument that his departure could set off bloodletting within the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), the coalition's dominant party, if he had to find a successor while it is reeling from the shock election results.

However, political analysts say he is in danger of facing a leadership challenge in spite of being endorsed by the Umno leadership for a second term - either in the coming days as he tries to form a new cabinet or later this year in scheduled party elections.

Mahathir Mohamad, the prime minister's long-serving predecessor, and his son, Mukhriz Mahathir, a rising politician and a leader of the Umno youth wing, have called for Mr Abdullah to step down.

Dr Mahathir, who handed over government leadership to Mr Abdullah in 2003 after campaigning against his successor for the past two years, saying he has proved to be ineffective. Mr Abdullah fell foul of his predecessor as he tried to moderate some of his policies.

The former prime minister has given his support to Najib Razak, who as deputy prime minister is Mr Abdul-



Abdullah Badawi (left) is sworn in for his second term as prime minister yesterday before the king of Malaysia, Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin

AFP/Getty

lah's natural successor.

The Mahathir wing of Umno are strong defenders of the long-standing programme of giving economic preferences to the ethnic Malay majority, known as the New Economic Policy. Mr Najib's father launched the programme when he was prime minister in the early 1970s.

But the NEP has become unpopular among Malaysia's ethnic Chinese and Indian

minorities, who regard it as discriminatory, and the issue was the main reason for the defection of many to the opposition at last weekend's election.

Mr Najib's chances of succeeding Mr Abdullah have been hurt, however, by the fact that he was in charge of the Umno election campaign and is being blamed by the party's insiders for the government setback. In addition, Mr Najib's image has

been tarnished by a murder trial involving a close aide, who allegedly ordered the killing of the aide's Mongolian mistress.

"Putting Najib into power could be a mistake when the election showed there was strong public dissatisfaction about the government's handling of crime and corruption," said a foreign diplomat in Kuala Lumpur.

Hishammuddin Hussein, the education minister and head of the Umno youth wing, has been mentioned as another potential successor from the Mahathir wing. He has a strong political pedigree: his grandfather founded Umno and his father was a former prime minister. But he is also seen as an "ultra", a hardline supporter of Malay special rights, and he angered minorities by waging a kris (the traditional Malay sword) at an Umno party convention in 2006, vowing

to defend the NEP against attempts to undermine it.

The fallout from the election debacle could provide an opportunity for reform-minded Umno politicians to try to take control. Razaleigh Hamzah, a party grandee who mounted a challenge to Dr Mahathir in 1987, issued a statement suggesting that the entire top Umno leadership should depart, which was seen as a sign that he might be planning a comeback.

"If Umno doesn't wake up, it will be buried," said a Razaleigh aide. Rais Yatim, the culture minister and a Razaleigh ally, is another possible candidate. The Razaleigh camp could be backed by Shahrir Samad, a popular but maverick politician who is the de facto Umno leader in Johor, the party's strongest state.

The next few days could be crucial as Mr Abdullah tries to form a new cabinet.

Umno, with its own power base weakened, has seen its traditional coalition allies decimated in the election and must rely much more now on independent-minded parties from the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak to stay in power.

Umno, which held a simple majority on its own in the last parliament, now has just 78 seats in the expanded 222-member chamber, while the two Borneo parties hold 42 of the 140 National Front seats.

The Borneo parties could play a pivotal role. Some political analysts even suggest that if they are not pleased with the allocation of cabinet seats, they could defect and bring down Mr Abdullah's administration, paving the way for Malaysia's first non-National Front government since independence in 1957.

Election issues

- Inflation, particularly in urban areas, has widened the income gap, one of the largest in south-east Asia

- Racial fears among the ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities focused on the government's policy of preferential treatment of the Muslim Malay majority

- Little progress in tackling official corruption in spite of government promises to promote clean government

- Rising crime rates blamed on growing income disparity and the ineffectiveness of the police force, which is seen as the most corrupt government agency