

Malaysian leader may get left behind

By Thomas Fuller

KUALA LUMPUR: Public protests are frowned upon by Malaysia's mildly authoritarian government and often broken up by the riot police. So when a group of opposition party members and activists wanted to send a message to Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi earlier this year they chose a softer and safer alternative: delivering a pillow to his office.

"He has a reputation for liking to sleep," said Rahmat Haron, who helped lead the small delegation that made it as far as the security checkpoint. "He sleeps in cabinet meetings, he sleeps in Parliament. So we thought, why not make him more comfortable?"

As Malaysia prepares for general elections on Saturday, there is wide-

14T-7/31/2008
Coalition hanging on;
he's on shaky ground

spread agreement here that the coalition that has governed the country in one form or another since independence in 1957 will win enough votes to stay in power. But the fate of the prime minister, whose popularity has fallen sharply in recent months, is less certain.

Abdullah is being portrayed both by the opposition and by some high-profile members of his own party as sluggish and listless.

On Wednesday, Mahathir bin Mohamad, who preceded Abdullah as prime minister and is from the same party, reiterated his regret for having chosen

Abdullah as his successor and called for Malaysians to elect a strong opposition — a stunning reversal for a man who while in office sent opposition members to jail.

Abdullah, who came to power in 2003 promising sweeping reforms and crackdowns on corruption, has struggled to convince voters that he can deliver, says Ibrahim Suffian, director of the Merdeka Center, an independent polling agency.

"He looks a bit out of touch," Ibrahim said. At a time of rising crime, higher food prices and ethnic tensions, Ibrahim added, "he's basically telling people that there are no problems."

Abdullah led the National Front coalition to a landslide victory in 2004,

MALAYSIA, Continued on Page 4



Lai Seng Sin/The Associated Press

A man hanging campaign posters in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday, in front of banners for Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, whose popularity has fallen recently.

As Malaysia nears vote, leader's fate up in the air

MALAYSIA, From Page 1

winning more than 90 percent of the seats in Parliament. But his administration has been beset by scandals and controversies that have challenged the prime minister's now widely mocked nickname of Mr. Clean.

A top aide to the country's deputy prime minister is on trial charged with abetting the slaying of his Mongolian mistress, a killing in which the suspects are two police commandos who also served as Abdullah's bodyguards. And lawyers in the country were stunned last year by the release of a videotape of a leading lawyer apparently discussing judicial appointments with a top judge. The videotape was made before Abdullah came to power but has led to renewed calls for reforms of the judiciary.

In the face of criticism, Abdullah has come across as defensive.

"We are not deaf, for we hear what the people say," Abdullah said this week, according to the state-run news agency Bernama. "We are not asleep, for we are working."

If the governing coalition's majority is narrowed significantly, Abdullah's position would be weakened inside his party, the United Malays National Organization, and he could face pressure to step down at a party conference scheduled for later this year, analysts say.

From the vantage point of central Kuala Lumpur, the country appears to be booming. The sounds and sights of jackhammers, cranes and backhoes across the city are testament to the continued transformation of what was once a sleepy backwater into a thriving, cosmopolitan Southeast Asian capital.

But many Malaysians say they are worried about the country's economic prospects.

In a survey of 1,026 registered voters released by the Merdeka Center in January, only 19 percent of ethnic Chinese, who form the cornerstone of the country's business community, said they expected the economy to improve in the coming year.

Price increases for food and fuel, both of which are subsidized here, are major campaign issues. Voters surveyed listed inflation, inequality, ethnic relations and rises in crime as their top concerns.

Income distribution in Malaysia is the least equal of all Asian countries but Papua New Guinea, according to UN statistics.

"Bread and butter issues have been essential in all the constituencies," said Bridget Welsh, a specialist in Malaysian politics at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington.

Analysts expect the ruling coalition to lose ground in several states including Penang and Terengganu. But the coalition has the formidable advantage of five decades of incumbency. The leading newspapers in Malaysia are owned or linked to parties in the coalition and are widely criticized as slavishly pro-government during election campaigns.

Human Rights Watch, a watchdog group based in the United States, said in a statement this week that irregularities in the electoral rolls and curbs on media freedom would make the election "grossly unfair."

This week, Malaysia's election commission unexpectedly rescinded a decision to use indelible ink on voters' fingers to prevent people from using identity cards of deceased voters and casting votes several times. Opposition parties have long complained of "phantom" voters — dead people who have never been struck from the election rolls.

The election commission claims that 8,666 registered voters on the election rolls are more than 100 years old, including two people who are 128, which seems unlikely in a country where life expectancy is 72.

Welsh says the monitoring of vote counting was made more difficult after a ruling by the election commission to allow only one representative per party in counting centers.

"Changing of the rules at the last minute undermines faith in the electoral system," Welsh said.

The opposition is made up of an Islamic party with a strong base in northern peninsular Malaysia, a Chinese-led party with a loyal urban following and the relatively young party of Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy prime minister who was dismissed from office after an internal squabble in the governing party in the late 1990s.

Anwar is barred from running for office in this election because of a 1999 conviction for abuse of power in a highly politicized trial. But he has campaigned on behalf of the other candidates from his party, including his wife and daughter.