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Party veterans called up for Malaysia's poll

Ruling coalition to rely on 'old guard'

Racial tensions to dominate election

By John Burton
in Singapore

Campaigning for Malaysia's March 8 election began yesterday, with the long-ruling National Front coalition government nominating many old-guard politicians as leading candidates, dashing expectations of a shake-up to quell voter discontent.

The election is taking place amid increased racial polarisation in the multi-ethnic country and opposition protests that the electoral system is biased towards the government.

The National Front, which holds 90 per cent of parliamentary seats, is expected to win. But a sharp drop in pro-government voting support could undermine the authority of Abdullah Badawi, the prime minister, within the United Malays National Organisation, the coalition's dominant partner.

Mr Abdullah's decision to retain many Umno veterans reflects his reliance on them as grassroots leaders able to rally government votes. He also needs their support in the party elections scheduled to take place later this year.

There had been speculation that Mr Abdullah might seek to drop some controversial cabinet ministers in an

effort to appeal to disaffected voters, who have complained about alleged corruption.

In addition, ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities say they are being marginalised by the government's policy of preferential treatment of the ethnic Malay majority, which is seen as a main election issue.

The backlash among the minorities, who make up more than 40 per cent of the population, has changed the dynamics of this year's polls. In previous elections, the government's strongest challenge came from the conservative rural-based Islamic Party (Pas), which led to a split in the ethnic Malay vote. But this time Malays appear to be supporting the government as it comes under criticism from Chinese and Indian voters.

The main electoral battleground has shifted to Kuala Lumpur and Penang, big cities with large Chinese and Indian populations. The Malaysian Chinese Association and the Malaysian Indian Congress, which represent minority interests in the government, are struggling to avoid a defection of voters to opposition parties.

An informal alliance of the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action party, the largest opposition group, Pas and the People's Justice party, led by former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, will contest nearly all of the 222 parliamentary seats, as well as 505 state assembly seats.

The opposition wants to remove the government's two-thirds parliamentary majority, which allows it to change the constitution. But it complains it faces an uphill task because the gerrymandering of constituencies benefits the government, which also controls the mass media. The government has denied opposition claims of vote-buying or the use of bogus voters.

Pas is trying to broaden its appeal by nominating its first non-Muslim candidate, one of several women that it is promoting in the election. Mr Anwar's wife, the only People's Justice parliamentary member, and his daughter will be candidates. Mr Anwar himself is barred from standing by a conviction for corruption.



Abdullah Badawi: needs to rally voters at grass roots