

# Voters turn on Malaysia's old guard

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**AFTER five decades of political power, Malaysia's ruling coalition suffered a humiliating rebuff at the weekend, ushering in one of the biggest shifts in Southeast Asian politics in almost 40 years.**

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is now facing a barrage of calls to resign - including from former leader Mahathir Mohamad - following the opposition Islamists and reformists' surge to power. Mr Abdullah's Barisan Nasional coalition lost its crucial two-thirds majority in parliament and five of 13 states to the opposition and will need opposition co-operation to make constitutional changes.

It is the first time since independence in 1957 that Malaysians have seen a significant opposition in parliament. Mr Abdullah was savaged by Dr Mahathir, who handed over to Mr Abdullah in 2003 after two decades leading the United National Malays Organisation, which dominates the coalition.

"My view is he has destroyed UMNO, destroyed the BN and he has been responsible for this," Dr Mahathir said.

He suggested Mr Abdullah should resign, and admitted he had made a mistake in selecting him as prime minister. "I think he should accept responsibility for this. He should accept 100 per cent responsibility," he said. "I am sorry but I apparently made the wrong choice." Opposition figurehead Anwar Ibrahim hailed "a new dawn for Malaysia", staging a political comeback after being sacked and jailed a decade ago.

Mr Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, extended her majority in her constituency in the island state of Penang, while his daughter Nurul Izzah Anwar unseated a government minister in her first election fight.

Mr Abdullah has dismissed any pressure from party members to step down.

"I don't know who would pressure me. There is nothing at this time," he said, while his spokesman said he no plans to resign. "He has no intention to step down," Kamal Khalid said, although he admitted the premier was "surprised" by the scale of the setback.

"He has actually received quite a lot of support from senior party leaders and he is still on track to be sworn in tomorrow." Dr Mahathir cited voters' frustrations over price hikes and alleged nepotism as the main reason for the poor election showing, which gave the National Front 139 parliamentary seats and the opposition alliance 82 seats with one still to be decided. Previously, the opposition held only 19 seats.

He said successive high economic growth had not trickled down to ordinary Malaysians, who were now suffering from the rising cost of living.