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Opposition Weakens in Malaysia

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Prime minister's ruling party coasts to victory over the weekend in two special elections

By YANTOULTRA NGUI

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Prime Minister Najib Razak's ruling party won in two special elections Saturday, a result that exposes weakening opposition parties in the Southeast Asian nation and that could build momentum for Mr. Najib's coalition heading toward the next general election.

The ruling United Malays National Organization expanded its majorities in two parliamentary districts where the incumbents were killed in a helicopter crash while campaigning for the ruling coalition in local elections earlier this year.

In one seat, UMNO's winning margin against its closest competitor in a three-way race was 29 percentage points compared with the one percentage point it secured in a fight against a sole opponent in 2013 national elections. In the other seat, it won by a 30-percentage-point margin in a



UMNO candidate Mastura Mohamad Yazid showing her ink-stained finger after voting Saturday.

four-cornered fight, up from the four-percentage-point majority it won in 2013.

Total turnout of the 75,600 eligible voters in the two districts, both of which are quickly urbanizing areas in mainland Malaysia, was more than 70%, according to Malaysia's election commission.

Political analysts said the 62-year-old Mr. Najib is now well placed to take on a frail

and divided opposition in the next general elections, due by 2018. That is despite calls from some opponents for him to resign over financial scandals related to a state investment fund which the prime minister founded in 2009 to boost investment, 1Malaysia Development Bhd., or 1MDB.

Investigators in at least seven countries are probing 1MDB. Some investigators have

said they believe \$6 billion has gone missing.

Mr. Najib and 1MDB have repeatedly denied wrongdoing. 1MDB says it is cooperating with the investigations. Malaysia's attorney general, Mohamed Apandi Ali, cleared Mr. Najib of wrongdoing in January.

Opposition infighting has worsened since its leader Anwar Ibrahim was jailed in 2015

on sodomy charges that he has denied. That followed the opposition's strongest-ever election performance in 2013, in which it won the popular vote but didn't win enough seats to form a government.

In both of Saturday's elections, former opposition allies were competing against each other as well as ruling coalition Barisan Nasional, or National Front, candidates.

So long as the opposition remains divided, Mr. Najib's coalition stands poised to perform well if the prime minister opts to dissolve parliament sooner instead of waiting for the full term to expire in 2018, said Ibrahim Suffian, head of independent polling organization Merdeka Center.

"The only way for them [the opposition] to offer a meaningful challenge to Barisan Nasional is if they can recover their pragmatism and maturity to work as partners," he said.

In a statement Sunday, Mr. Najib praised the unity in UMNO and the ruling coalition.

"Barisan Nasional succeeded because we worked as a team," Mr. Najib said. "We prevailed, and, if we continue to work tirelessly for the people and remain united, we will always prevail."

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