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# NAJIB

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Barisan Nasional remained strong in Sarawak state," Mr. Najib told a news conference. The 62-year-old prime minister said the outcome meant increased momentum for the National Front toward the next general election, which he hinted could be held before it is due in 2018.

However, it is uncertain if the result in Sarawak, Malaysia's largest state by area and traditionally a National Front stronghold, will signal broader support for the government in the main urban and economic centers in the country's west.

Mr. Najib was helped by support from a popular local ally, Chief Minister Adenan Satem, who has emerged as a power broker in Malaysian politics. But Mr. Najib for now has rejected Sarawak's desire for a greater share of

national oil and gas royalties as he contends with budgetary challenges from declining oil prices.

Ethnically diverse Sarawak lies on Borneo island, across the South China Sea from Malaysia's mainland power centers, and is the only Christian-majority state in the Muslim-majority country. Sarawak provides Mr. Najib's coalition with nearly a fifth of its 133 seats in the national parliament. The state's seats were crucial to the coalition's retaining its parliamentary majority in a close election in 2013.

The state-election results provide Mr. Najib "some relief," said Ibrahim Suffian, head of independent polling organization Merdeka Center. "The real challenge, however, would be to convince voters in west Malaysia to continue supporting Barisan Nasional."

The next test could come sooner than previously expected, Mr. Ibrahim said. By-

elections will likely be held to replace two members of parliament from marginal seats in peninsula Malaysia killed in a helicopter crash while visiting Sarawak to campaign for the Front.

The Sarawak election marks a rare piece of good news for Mr. Najib since the 1MDB scandal erupted a year ago.

## Mr. Najib has rejected Sarawak's desire for a greater share of oil and gas royalties.

The Wall Street Journal, citing Malaysian and global investigations, has reported how investigators have found about \$1 billion was transferred to Mr. Najib's personal bank accounts, the majority originating from the 1MDB fund and moving via a web of intermediary entities. The fund is under investigation by authorities in Malaysia and in at least six other countries.

Mr. Najib, who headed 1MDB's board of advisers until it was dissolved last week, has denied wrongdoing or taking money for personal gain. 1MDB has denied wrongdoing or giving any money to Mr. Najib and said it was cooperating with probes. Malaysia's attorney general in January said much of the money was a legal po-

litical donation from the Saudi royal family and that most of that was returned. He cleared Mr. Najib of wrongdoing.

As Mr. Najib's position has weakened, the standing of his Sarawak ally has improved. The 72-year-old Mr. Adenan has increasingly touted Sarawak's autonomy and distanced himself from Mr. Najib and the premier's United Malays National Or-

ganization, the country's dominant political party.

Mr. Adenan has returned English to its status as the state's official language alongside Malay. He has also reassured Sarawak Christians that they can use the Arabic word Allah to refer to their God, despite a campaign by Muslim hard-liners against what they consider blasphemy. And he has fought with the national government for a greater share of revenues from the state's oil fields.

"Mr. Adenan is bold because he knows Barisan Nasional is very much dependent on Sarawak," said Faisal S. Hazis, head of the Center for Asian Studies at the National University of Malaysia. "He is playing the role of a kingmaker."

Mr. Adenan has pushed hard to increase Sarawak's share of the royalty from its 60 fields producing oil and gas to help fund infrastructure and modernization proj-

ects. Last year, state oil company Petroliaam Nasional Bhd, or Petronas, increased the state's allocation, but well short of the 20% that Sarawak has demanded.

Mr. Najib said recently that increasing Sarawak's royalty was off the table for now. About 30% of the government's 225 billion ringgit (\$56.3 billion) in revenue was oil-related in 2014, when prices were more than \$100 per barrel and an unpopular goods-and-services tax took hold. The government is braced for a revenue shortfall of 40 billion ringgit this year compared with 2014, a pinch that will ripple across the nation.

"There will be more autonomy for Sarawak, but it can't do much on the oil royalty with low oil prices now," said James Chin, head of the Asia Institute at the University of Tasmania. "Sarawak will rather get more autonomy in civil service, education, local bylaws."