

Malaysian leader rolls the dice on election

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First Mahathir Mohamad defied the IMF at the height of Asia's economic crisis. When his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, took issue with that, he was fired and arrested on charges of sex crimes. Now, Malaysia's prime minister plans to seal his victory in a snap election he called Wednesday. Despite widespread protests generated by Anwar's arrest last year, opposition parties concede that Mahathir's United Malays National Organization (UMNO) party is likely to win the poll, which will be held sometime in December. But Mahathir's critics are hoping to deny UMNO the two-thirds majority that has kept the prime minister in power for the past 18 years.

Despite being confident of victory, Mahathir knows he is facing the biggest test of his political career — and accelerating the timetable for an election that had been scheduled for next summer is clearly designed to win tactical advantages. Even though divergent Islamic- and socialist-oriented parties have agreed to fight the election on a common reformist, anti-corruption platform, the new election date leaves them very little time to organize their campaign. The 73-year-old patriarch may also be concerned about wrapping up the election before January, when 650,000 young Malaysians become eligible to vote, because younger voters are viewed as potentially more sympathetic to the opposition. Mahathir's biggest hurdle, though, may yet come before the election: The prime minister has been called to testify at Anwar's sodomy trial, and a courtroom showdown between Mahathir and the former deputy who claims he's the victim of a political conspiracy may not play well at the polls. Previously, the prime minister's testimony had been delayed by Anwar's ill health. Then, on Wednesday, the trial judge complained of back pain and adjourned proceedings. Don't expect Mahathir to pass the Doan's pills.

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