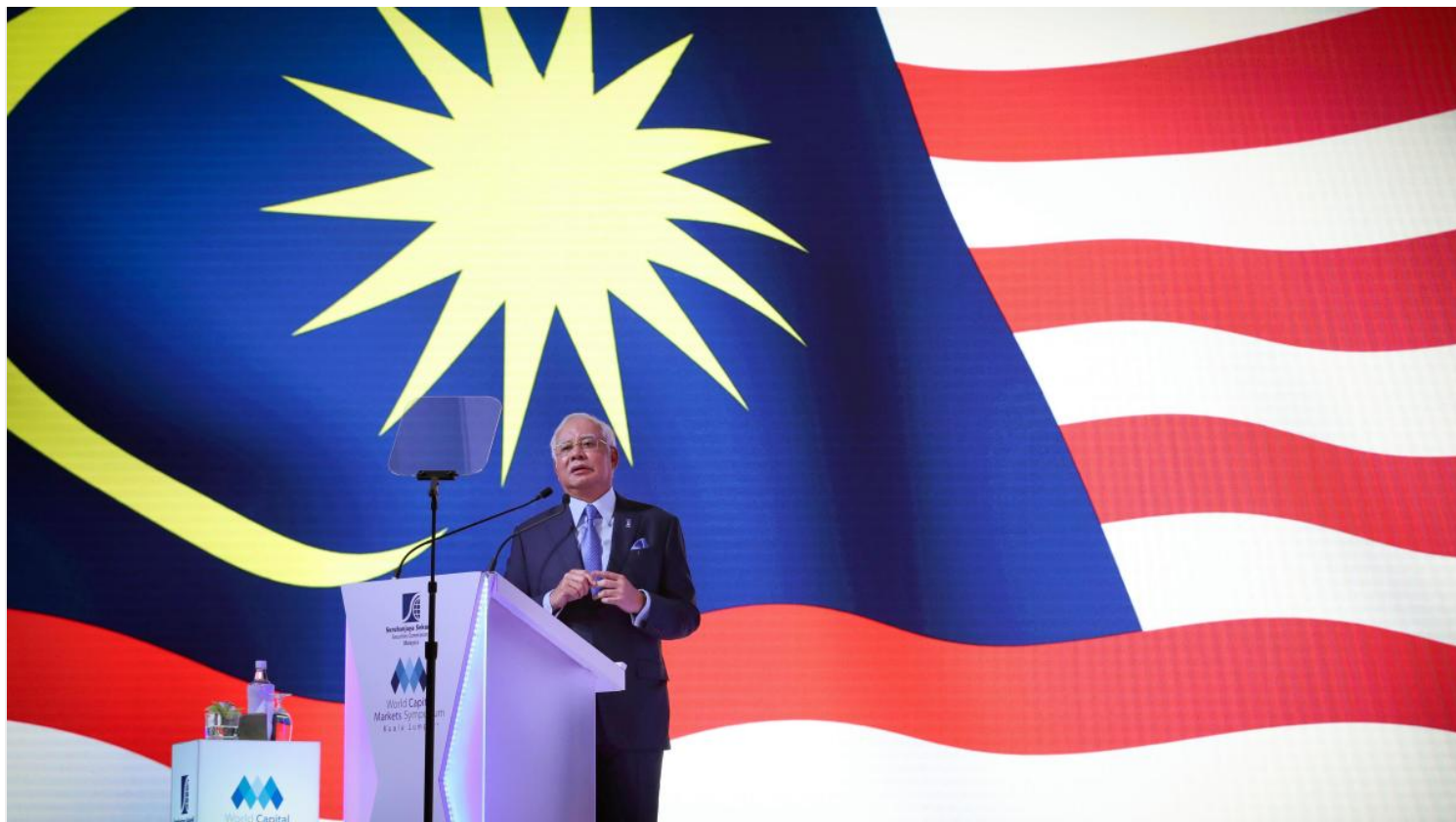


IN DEPTH

# Malaysia's nonagenarian iron fist Mahathir Mohamad is back — as a champion of clean politics

Mahathir Mohamad, 92, has emerged from political retirement to challenge his scandal-plagued protégé in an election that may shift Malaysia's place in the world. Daniel Hurst reports



Najib Razak has been accused of corruption on an industrial scale and of taking Malaysia further down an authoritarian path  
VINCENT THIAN/AP

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**I**n one corner is the nonagenarian former prime minister who ruled Malaysia with an iron fist for 22 years but is now allied with an opposition leader he helped to jail for homosexuality.

In the other is his protégé, the scandal-plagued incumbent who has been accused of corruption on an industrial scale and of taking the country yet further down an authoritarian path.

Tomorrow's general election between Mahathir Mohamad, 92, and Najib Razak, 64, whom he once mentored, is expected to be Malaysia's most competitive in years and could be a turning point in the country's democratic history.

Mr Najib's conservative Barisan Nasional (BN) alliance has, in various forms, ruled Malaysia since the country gained independence from Britain in 1957.



Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's leader for 22 years, is now on the same ticket as Anwar Ibrahim, his former deputy and the man he helped to have jailed for sodomy

FAZRY ISMAIL/EPA

In challenging his old party Dr Mahathir, who led the country between 1981 and 2003, has allied himself with an opposition he once suppressed and with Anwar Ibrahim, 70, a former political foe who is now in prison.

After he defied the IMF and steered Malaysia through the worst of the Asian financial crisis, Dr Mahathir sacked Mr Anwar as his deputy prime minister in 1998. Mr Anwar was jailed the following year on a sodomy charge that he has always denied, and which rights groups criticised as politically motivated.

The conviction was later quashed but Mr Anwar faced another setback to his political ambitions in 2014 when he was jailed again on another sodomy claim, this time under Mr Najib's administration.

Despite their strained personal history, Dr Mahathir says that he was driven to reconcile with Mr Anwar because of his disgust at corruption allegations against Mr Najib. If he wins Dr Mahathir would become the world's oldest elected leader.

Less than 24 hours before polls opened, Mr Anwar appealed for voters to cast their ballots in favour of his former political nemesis. "I urge you all to join the people's movement to demand for change," he said in a statement

from a hospital in Kuala Lumpur, the capital, where he is recovering from a shoulder operation.

While the government has the media in its pocket and Mr Najib remains the favourite, this contest is regarded as the opposition's best opportunity for decades.

Mr Najib's image has been tarnished by his alleged connection to a multibillion-pound fraud which is being investigated by the US Department of Justice.

The neighbouring southeast Asian countries of Singapore and Indonesia have co-operated with this inquiry, which centres around claims that hundreds of millions of pounds from the IMDB state investment fund ended up in Mr Najib's bank accounts.

He denies wrongdoing and the Malaysian authorities have said that the funds were a gift from a member of the Saudi Arabian royal family.



Girls cycle past posters for Mr Najib's Barisan National coalition in the prime minister's home town of Pekan, Pahang state. Polling analysts expect the prime minister to hang on

AP:ASSOCIATED PRESS

This furore will have bolstered the opposition in urban areas but it remains to be seen whether it has a broader electoral resonance.

In rural regions the ethnic Malay Muslim majority, which makes up just over half the nation's 31 million people, has traditionally favoured Mr Najib's socially and politically conservative alliance. Malaysia's minority Chinese and Indian ethnic groups have typically been stronger supporters of the opposition.

At stake too is Malaysia's place in the world. Under Mr Najib's leadership the country has drawn closer to China, and pictures featuring President Xi have even appeared on some of the ruling party's election billboards. Mr Najib's is able to tout an economy which grew 5.9 per cent last year, its fastest rate in three years.

Should Dr Mahathir lead the opposition Pakatan Harapan (PH) to victory, he has promised to review Chinese investments and promote local hiring.

He has also mooted political reforms such as imposing a two-term limit for prime ministers, and in an appeal to voters' pockets he has proposed to scrap a 6 per cent goods and services tax.

Most intriguingly, he has said he will only serve in a caretaker capacity and hand over the prime ministerial reins to Mr Anwar after he is freed from prison in the coming months.

Mr Anwar has reassured his supporters of his former foe's transformation. "Mahathir has proven his tenacity, accepted past limitations, apologised and sacrificed his time and energy to raise the dignity of the people and the

country,” he said.

The irony of Dr Mahathir presenting himself as a democratic champion is not lost on observers. Human Rights Watch has previously accused him of using repressive laws to silence or imprison his critics and limiting judicial checks on executive power during his time as prime minister.

“Anybody watching Malaysia knows that Mahathir is the least likely democrat for the country,” Bridget Welsh, an associate professor at John Cabot University in Rome, told *The Times*.



Ibrahim and Dr Mahathir in 1998, before the rift that led to the former being jailed for the first time. He later fell foul of Mr Najib and was again jailed for sodomy, which he denies

VINCENT THIAN/AP

Professor Welsh added that Mr Najib had learnt from Dr Mahathir. “Many of the things that Najib has done to stay in power were very Machiavellian, Mahathir moves ... Najib has moved the country towards a more authoritarian direction since 2013. The sense is that if he wins, especially if he wins big, this pattern will continue.”



According to one recent poll Dr Mahathir's PH coalition is projected to win 43.4 per cent of the popular vote compared with 37.3 per cent for Mr Najib's BN group.

However, the independent polling firm Merdeka Center said that the concentration of opposition support still suggested a BN victory. BN failed to win the popular vote in the 2013 election but held the majority of seats, and a round of electoral boundary changes that took place before the campaign will reinforce this structural advantage.

The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia has described these boundary changes as an "epic breach" of democracy. There have also been claims by electoral reform groups of significant discrepancies in voter lists.



Members of the Malaysian armed forces casting their votes at the weekend. Tomorrow is election day

MANAN VATSYAYANA/GETTY IMAGES

Despite the government's manufactured advantages, the strain is showing. In the week before the election, police opened an investigation into Dr Mahathir over claims that he had breached the country's new ban on spreading "fake news". A group that supports Mr Najib's party is believed to have lodged the complaint after Dr Mahathir claimed that sabotage might have been behind problems with a chartered plane due to fly him to a campaign appearance.

Dr Mahathir is the first politician to face investigation under the law, which carries a punishment of up to six years in jail and has been criticised as a mechanism to stifle dissent.

"It signifies weakness on the part of Najib," Professor Welsh said. "Having to rely on these levers of powers is not what a confident leader does. I think they seem to not fully understand that the more they attack Mahathir the stronger he gets."

Mr Najib is well aware that a failure to secure a large majority for his party in the 222-seat parliament, where it now has 133, will raise question marks over his leadership. Dr

Mahathir's immediate successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was forced out of the leadership within a year of a poor showing in the 2008 election. He was succeeded by Mr Najib.

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They need to remove Najib from office ASAP and then put him and his cronies on trial for the 1MDB scandal and recover the funds.

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**Alastair Stevens** 2 hours ago

Such a shame that Malaysia, a country of enormous potential, is held to ransom by such a hateful cronyist government. Time to shake them off at last! But ultimately, until they shake off the entire apartheid system and structurally-engineered racism, not to mention the heavy yoke of a certain

belief system (i.e. brainwashing-from-birth religion), there will be massive headwinds to progress....

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**Nemo** 2 hours ago

Many Tories would like to have Margaret Thatcher back as their PM right now. View Mahathir as the Malaysian facsimile.

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