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Getting there is the easy part

*Najib will have a host
of issues to tackle;
it's a different Malaysia
he's going to run*

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BARRING any major scandals, Mr Najib Abdul Razak will become Malaysia's Prime Minister by next March.

At 55, the youngish and debonair Pahang aristocrat will be achieving his goal at an age not uncommon for first-time Prime Ministers in Malaysia.

Of the five previous ones, three got into top office when they were around 54 to 56. Mr Najib's father, Mr Abdul Razak Hussein, was the youngest ever, becoming Prime Minister at 48. Mr Abdullah Badawi was the oldest, at 64.

Few in the upper echelons of power in Malaysia can match Mr Najib's political breeding. Not only is his father remembered by Malays in general as the man who laid the groundwork for Malay progress, Mr Najib is also nephew-in-law of his father's successor, the much respected Hussein Onn.

Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein is therefore his first cousin on their mother's side.

Not only do blood ties place Mr Najib auspiciously in the Umno power structure, among the ruling class of both Johor and Pahang, few have the wide experience in government that he boasts of.

A graduate in Industrial Economics from the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom, he was drawn into politics by his father's sudden demise in 1976. He was soon made deputy minister in several ministries, including finance and education.

Later, he headed both those key ministries, and was also Pahang Menteri Besar. He held the powerful position of Umno Youth chief from 1987 to 1993.

Given such a background, being Prime Minister should not pose too big a challenge for Mr Najib. He is known to be a decisive man when he needs to be.

However, holding positions of power for 32 years has left him tainted by controversies and scandals. Corruption allegations follow him endlessly, and might haunt him all the more once he becomes Prime Minister.

Non-Malays have not forgotten his part in fanning inter-ethnic tensions in 1987 with threats of soaking a keris (Malay dagger) in Chinese blood. Incessant claims that he was involved in the murder in 2006 of a Mongolian woman, Ms Altantuya Shaariibuu, have harmed his reputation somewhat.

The latest controversy centres around tender irregularities in the ongoing purchase of 12 aircraft from the French-German firm, Eurocopters.

Despite these predicaments, Mr Najib's control over the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) once he becomes its president is expected to be strong. His career path and political network put him ahead of most potential contenders. However, circumstances surrounding his ascendance to the premiership are far from ideal.

The reason why Mr Abdullah has to leave will also be the cause of much anxiety for a Najib administration. The opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR), led by Mr Anwar Ibrahim, is now a formidable presence in Parliament. With the opposition holding more than a third of the seats, Mr Najib, as Premier, will be able to make constitutional amendments only with PR's collaboration.

For the first time in Malaysian history, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) will be faced with an alternative coalition daring to dream of replacing it. To make matters worse for the BN, all its five members in mainland Malaysia, including Umno, fared badly in the March elections. The next BN leader will have to pay close attention to the strength and loyalty of its lesser allies, and reduce Malay-centrism within Umno.

By and large, Mr Najib will need to demonstrate that he can withstand Mr Anwar's onslaughts and escape the stamp of passivity and tentativeness that Mr Abdullah's administration has been known for — and do all that without allowing former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad to steer his hand.

The purported reason why he was passed over by Dr Mahathir — Mr Najib's former mentor — in 2003 when the latter was choosing a successor is not an issue for Umno at

the moment. The Muslim vote that Dr Mahathir lost for BN in 1999 and that Mr Abdullah managed to regain in 2004 is now firmly in the hands of the opposition. It is not there any longer for Mr Najib to lose, as was Dr Mahathir's fear in 2003.

With opposition leader Mr Anwar now seeking to be the next Premier instead of Mr Najib, the latter will have little time for rest. The war of words between these two men will be intense, and there will be no shortage of political intrigue for Malaysians to gasp over in the coming months.

At present, the person most likely to become Mr Najib's deputy is Minister of International Trade and Industry Muhyiddin Yassin. Born in 1947, Mr Muhyiddin is six years older than Mr Najib. He is known to have ambitions of becoming Umno president, and being No 2 to the younger Najib does not say much of his chances of ever getting there. How loyal Mr Muhyuddin will be to Mr Najib has yet to be tested.

The writer is a Fellow at the Institute of South-east Asian Studies. His latest book is *Lost in Transition: Malaysia under Abdullah*.