

# world

## Malaysia in turmoil as Mahathir, Anwar vie for power

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● **Anwar said he had received backing from three parties in the "Pact of Hope" coalition**

● **Officially the king appoints the prime minister**

● **A candidate must have the backing of at least 112 MPs**

AFP | Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia was plunged into a bitter power struggle Wednesday as Mahathir Mohamad sought to form a unity government following his shock resignation, but old foe Anwar Ibrahim also pushed to become premier.

The developments deepened a crisis that began when the ruling coalition -- which included both men when it stormed to a historic poll victory in 2018 -- fell apart after a failed bid to establish a new government without Anwar.

Anwar was Mahathir's designated successor, but he would likely have been pushed out and blocked from becoming leader if the weekend bid had succeeded.

Their notoriously stormy relationship has shaped Malaysian politics ever since Mahathir -- during a first stint in office in the 1990s -- sacked Anwar as his deputy, and he was jailed on dubious sodomy and corruption



Anwar Ibrahim waves in Kuala Lumpur before announcing he was the preferred candidate of a parliamentary coalition

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MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

charges.

They reconciled ahead of the 2018 polls to oust a corruption-plagued coalition led by Najib Razak, but many were sceptical Mahathir -- at 94, the world's oldest leader -- would stick to a vow to hand power to Anwar.

Mahathir quit Monday as premier but it remains unclear whether he had a hand in the plot to topple the government, although analysts suspect he at least gave it his blessing. He has been named interim leader and initially appeared to have strong support to remain as premier.

But backing fell away early Wednesday and rumours swirled Anwar had garnered enough support from MPs for the top job, fuelling expectations

that Mahathir might finally cede power.

The elderly leader, however, announced in a televised address to the nation that he wished to establish a unity government, and was willing to return as premier.

"Party politics must be put aside for now," said Mahathir. "If allowed, I will try to form an inclusive government, not siding with any political parties."

"If I still have the support I will return. If not I will accept whoever is chosen," he added.

### Jockeying for support

Moments later at a press conference at his party headquarters, Anwar said he had received backing from three parties in the "Pact of Hope" coalition --

the grouping in power until Mahathir quit -- to become premier.

Anwar, 72, said the coalition had invited Mahathir to a meeting on Tuesday evening aimed at reviving the coalition, but after he failed to show they decided to put him forward as their candidate.

"Since the attempt to topple the government last week we have remained steadfast in defending the mandate of the Malaysian people," he said.

After reading a statement, he added: "We leave it to the palace to decide".

Officially the king appoints the prime minister, and he has been interviewing all the country's MPs since Monday to work out who they support.

A candidate must have the backing of at least 112 MPs -- but it was not clear whether Anwar or Mahathir would achieve that, and there are likely to be days of political horse-trading ahead.

Reports say that Mahathir had already proposed a unity government to leaders across the

political spectrum Tuesday, but they rejected the idea.

James Chin, a Malaysia expert from the University of Tasmania, said he believed Mahathir, who had a first stint as premier from 1981 to 2003, would likely prevail in the power struggle.

"The best thing is to hold a general election, but both sides don't want it -- they are afraid people will punish them," he added.

The victory of the "Pact of Hope" alliance in 2018 was initially greeted with euphoria as it ended the six-decade rule of the notoriously corrupt Barisan Nasional coalition and prime minister Najib.

Najib was accused of involvement in stealing billions of dollars from state fund IMDB, and is now on trial.

But the alliance's popularity quickly fell amid bitter infighting over who would succeed Mahathir, and it faced accusations of failing to protect the rights of the multi-ethnic country's Muslim majority.



Malaysia's King Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah hands out packages of fast food to reporters camped outside the National Palace. The king is currently meeting members of parliament to ask who they support as premier

## Trial opens for US students over Italy police death

AFP | Rome

Two US students are expected to appear in an Italian court on Wednesday on the first day of their trial over the fatal stabbing last year of a policeman during a botched drugs bust.

Finnegan Lee Elder and Gabriel Natale-Hjorth have been charged with killing newlywed Mario Cerciello Rega, 35, who was stabbed 11 times during the attack last July.

The Californians, who had been on holiday in Rome and were teenagers at the time, face a life sentence if convicted.

In Italy, the slaying aroused an outpouring of public sympathy for Cerciello, who had just returned from his honeymoon when he was killed. Huge crowds attended his funeral, which was broadcast live on television, where he was hailed as a hero.

"His murder cannot and must not go unpunished," his wife, Maria Rosaria Esilio, said in a statement on the eve of the trial.

"My family has ended with Mario's death, because our unborn children and dreams were buried with him," she said.

But the case has been marked by major blunders -- espe-



Carabinieri officer Mario Cerciello Rega was killed last July in an altercation with two American students

cially the blindfolding of Natale-Hjorth during his police interrogation -- and contradictory statements made by the key prosecution witness, Cerciello's partner Andrea Varriale.

In the aftermath, Varriale said he and Cerciello had been attacked by men of North African descent. He also initially claimed he had been armed. Both officers were in fact unarmed and acted without backup, in violation of police procedure.

Amid the intense media focus in the case, comparisons have

been made to the high-profile trial of Amanda Knox, a US student convicted and later acquitted of a 2007 murder in Italy.

### 32-second attack

Elder has admitted to stabbing Cerciello with a 7-inch (18 cm) serrated-edge combat knife he had stashed in his sweatshirt but told investigators he thought he and his friend were being set upon by drug dealers.

The young men and Varriale have given opposing versions of what happened during the



The funeral of the slain Carabinieri officer Mario Cerciello Rega drew a huge crowd and was shown live on television

32-second attack in the early hours of the morning, which followed a drug deal gone wrong.

Hours earlier, the young men from the San Francisco Bay Area had gone looking for cocaine in the popular night-life area of Trastevere. Intermediary Sergio Brugiattelli introduced them to a dealer who sold them aspirin instead.

In retaliation, the teens stole Brugiattelli's bag, before demanding money and drugs to return it.

Cerciello and Varriale went

in Brugiattelli's place to the designated exchange point in an upscale neighbourhood near the teenagers' hotel but the handover never took place.

Elder, now age 20, told police they were jumped from behind by the officers and believed they were thugs sent by Brugiattelli.

Varriale has said he and Cerciello, both in plain clothes and unarmed, told the young men they were police, but that Elder pulled out a knife and attacked Cerciello, while Natale-Hjorth wrestled with Varriale.

The teens then fled to their nearby hotel, where police later found the military knife hidden behind a ceiling panel.

Under Italian law, Natale-Hjorth, who was 18 years old last July, faces the same charge of "voluntary homicide" with a special circumstance of killing a police officer, even though he did not stab Cerciello.

Both young men are also charged with attempted extortion. They face a maximum penalty of life imprisonment in isolation.