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`Greater responsibilities, more work'

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today thanked the supreme council for expressing its wish that he be made the party's deputy president.

The Deputy Prime Minister said the position came with more work and greater responsibilities. He is already carrying out the duties of deputy president following the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from the party in 1998.

"I am thankful to my supreme council friends for nominating me to the deputy president's post, and it means that heavier responsibilities await me," he said after the council's meeting at Menara Dato' Onn.

Party secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob had earlier announced that the council had unanimously decided that the posts of president and deputy president should not be contested.

It has also decided that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad be re-nominated as president and Abdullah be nominated for the deputy president's post.

The decision has been endorsed by State liaison heads who will convey the council's stand to branches and divisions at their meetings.

Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said he would defend his post in the party election to be held in May.

"It is natural," he said when asked if he would defend his post.

Acting Umno Youth head Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein said the council's stand was necessary as a contest could disunite the party.

"We are confident that it will be accepted by members with an open mind. It is made to strengthen the party and to ensure its struggles are continued," he said.

He added one had to remember that by convention, the holders of the top two posts in the party also occupied the posts of Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.

"Thus, we should not take the risk of disunity occurring because of a contest for both party posts."

On whether he would contest for the post of Umno Youth chief, Hishammuddin said he was ready for it, but stressed that he had to be nominated first.

On the possibility that he might be challenged for the post, Hishammuddin said he welcomed it.

Unlike the top two posts in the party, Hishammuddin said a contest for the Youth's top position would not cause much problems. Moreover, the movement was confident on its ability to close ranks after any contest.

In Kota Kinabalu, Sabah Umno Information chief, Senator Datuk Karim Ghani, welcomed the supreme council's decision which would enhance unity within the party.

"The deputy president's post is vacant, and it is good if the leadership can agree among themselves on who should fill the post. It is our priority to strengthen Umno," Karim said.

Sabah Umno Youth chief Juhari Janan said the movement agreed that both posts should not be contested.

"By not opening the president's and deputy president's posts for contest, we can avoid disunity within the party. We at the Youth movement welcome the decision," he said.

In Alor Star, party leaders voiced their support, saying it was the most

appropriate move as Umno needed to put its house in order and concentrate on strengthening the confidence of party members and the public.

State Umno liaison secretary Md Rozai Shafian said this could be done if members were not too absorbed in campaigning for party posts.

"We do not need to see further disunity among members ... we should not be concentrating too much on party election because our priority now is to work out the strategies to win back the support of the people.

"It will be better for the party if members can compromise so that there will also be no contest for the three vice-president's posts," he said.

Yan Umno division chairman Datuk Badruddin Amiruldin said the party which was still smarting from the bad showing in the general election should not be opened to a further split.

Alor Star division chairman Ahmad Bashah Md Hanipah said Umno was not in a situation where it could afford extensive campaigning for party posts.

"No more fights, we have to work to strengthen the party," he added.

In Ipoh, State Umno Youth chief Jamal Nasir Rasdi said it was a wise move by the supreme council to avoid a split in the party, and to show to the grassroots that too much politics could ruin the party.

Describing the move as keeping in line with Umno's tradition, Jamal Nasir said maintaining the current leadership would show younger members the importance of continuity.

"History has shown that it would be better to avoid a contest for the two top posts as it would cause a split within the party."

State Wanita chief Aionon Khairiyah said a contest would result in intense campaigning, soliciting for votes and eventually a rift within a party.

"We have already seen what the current leadership is capable of - their experience and maturity are still needed to lead the party as well as the country," she said.

Aionon also said Abdullah should be nominated for the deputy president's post as he had assumed the task for more than a year.

"He is familiar with the role and has all the ingredients of a good leader. I don't see any problem for him to be elected as deputy president."

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