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Three-year tenure to stay (HL)

Abdul Razak Ahmad; Sajahan Waheed

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - After careful and detailed discussions, the Umno supreme council today dropped its proposal to amend the constitution to increase the tenure of office of supreme council and divisional chiefs from three to five years, party deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

The proposal was meant to tune in the term of these office bearers to that of the duration of parliament.

The decision comes just two days before the extraordinary general assembly for delegates to debate, among others, whether or not to amend the constitution to provide for the five-year term.

Abdullah announced the decision after chairing a two-hour council meeting at the party headquarters at Putra World Trade Centre.

Party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who returned home after attending the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation summit in Brunei, said he accepted the council's decision.

"If the majority is such, we have to abide by it," he told reporters at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport.

He said that the divisions had earlier not raised objections "but later many voiced their disagreement and so we do not want to go ahead with the amendments".

Dr Mahathir said the proposal to extend the tenure of office of divisional heads and council members was never meant to enable a person to hold the post for a long period.

"We do not want to hold posts for a long time. Let it be anybody, if people do not agree that he holds the post, then people will not vote for him," he said.

Abdullah said after the meeting: "The decision was made after taking into account views which were submitted during my meeting with the division heads... (So) it's back to the status quo."

It is understood the council agreed to drop the proposed amendment after taking into consideration views from various quarters, including the grassroots.

The council had, at its last meeting two weeks ago, proposed an amendment to the constitution which would extend their term of service to five years.

In fact, many Umno watchers and observers had also made known their views on the amendment.

Abdullah, who is Deputy Prime Minister, said the council's decision reflected the party's willingness to listen and take into consideration the views of the grassroots and others.

Many members felt there was no need for an extension (of tenure) as the existing arrangement was working well.

Division heads also cited several implications, among which were that it would kill democracy and turn away younger people, the very ones Umno wants to attract.

Abdullah said the council also agreed that all three levels of the party structure - branch, division and supreme council - would hold their elections in the same year instead of the staggered sessions currently practised.

The move, he said, also meant that the branch committees' two-year term would be extended by another year.

We decided to have all levels of party election in the same year to reduce the regularity of party elections at whatever level, he added.

Asked about the call by quarters within the party, to abolish the requirement that candidates vying for council posts secure a certain percentage of nominations from the divisions, Abdullah said: "There was no suggestion on the matter from the supreme council."

He added that it was the division heads who expressed opinions on the matter when they met him on Sunday.

"We have been informed by the party's permanent chairman that according to the rules, this new proposal cannot be brought to the assembly (for tabling) because the extraordinary general assembly this Saturday is to discuss amendments proposed by the supreme council, not by the division heads."

As such, Abdullah said the present nomination system would remain.

Asked whether proposals from the grassroots were blocked by any of the party's committees, he said:

"All suggestions and views given to (vice-president) Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin who is the chairman of the constitutional amendment committee were submitted and discussed at three management and disciplinary committee meetings and three supreme council meetings."

Abdullah said although there might be divisions which believed their rejected proposals had sizeable support, they also needed to understand that there were other divisions which felt otherwise.

Taking this into account, he said the council decided to vet the proposals in such a way so that only those which had strong support were considered for tabling.

Asked what would happen if delegates at Saturday's assembly took to the floor and expressed their objection to any of the amendments, Abdullah said: "When we table any proposal, the permanent chairman will request for support from the floor."

Any proposed amendment must obtain a minimum two-thirds majority vote from the delegates, he said.

On party members who wanted to table individual motions, Abdullah said they must understand the amendments were decided by the council after taking into consideration the views expressed by all quarters.

"They must abide by the decision," he said.

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