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Najib is Deputy PM (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak will be appointed Deputy Prime Minister tomorrow.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will convey the decision to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong tomorrow morning and inform the Cabinet during its weekly meeting. He will officially announce the appointment in the afternoon, government sources confirmed today.

The appointment ends weeks of speculation on who would be chosen for the country's No. 2 job.

Najib, 50, who was thrust into politics after his father, the country's second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, died in 1976, will become the ninth Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia. He would retain his defence portfolio, the sources said.

Najib, who is also the seniormost Umno vice-president, contested the Pekan parliamentary seat which became vacant with the sudden death of Tun Razak. Najib was only 23.

Since then, he has served in various portfolios, including one term as Pahang Menteri Besar, chalking up the experience which places him in good stead for his new appointment as deputy to Abdullah.

Informed sources said Abdullah, who became Prime Minister on Oct 31 last year, after the retirement of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, had delayed the announcement because he wanted to put his key policy initiatives in place first.

He also wanted to ensure that his deputy would be able to work closely with him to implement these policies.

The initiatives that Abdullah has announced since taking office include:

- * combating corruption;
- * making agriculture a major component of his new economic thrust;
- * ensuring a better public delivery system;
- * reforming the police force and providing better facilities and perks for its personnel;
- * improving the quality of education;
- * prudent fiscal policies and management of public spending by putting off non-priority projects such as the RM14 billion double-tracking railway project; and,
- * re-emphasising the rule of law, transparency and corporate governance.

"Now that he has put his initiatives in place, he feels that it is time to appoint his deputy to assist him in the smooth implementation of the policies," the sources said.

Further, the sources said, he would need his deputy to assist him in explaining these policies in the next general election which must be held before the end of the year, but is widely speculated to be called in the second quarter of this year.

Abdullah informed Najib of the appointment during a meeting this afternoon in Putrajaya. Later in the evening, talk of the appointment was abuzz throughout the country.

Both Abdullah and Najib could not be reached for comment.

Tonight, Abdullah and the Cabinet hosted a farewell dinner for Tun Dr Mahathir at the Prime Minister's residence in Putrajaya. Najib and his Cabinet colleagues were present.