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Council to fix date for Umno polls

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The Umno supreme council meeting this Sunday will fix an early date, possibly within the next four months, for party elections which will see both Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Najib Razak elected unopposed to the party's top posts.

Abdullah, the Umno deputy president, became acting president following his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's retirement in October last year. He will seek to be confirmed as president. Najib will seek endorsement to be elevated to Abdullah's position as deputy president of Umno.

Umno officials said Abdullah, who will chair Sunday's meeting, will seek the council's endorsement to proceed with the elections and party assembly as early as allowed by the party's rules.

This is to ensure that party leaders are not distracted by campaigning and can instead focus on fulfilling their promises made during the general election campaign.

"With the party elections out of the way, we can work without any distraction," a council member said.

The elections were originally supposed to be held last year but was postponed.

Following the spectacular performance by the Barisan Nasional, and in particular Umno, in the general election, the assembly is not expected to see the normal intensity and acrimony of previous party elections.

Nevertheless, a keen contest is expected for the three vice-president posts and the 25 supreme council seats.

There will also be elections in the Wanita, Youth and Puteri wings.

The president's and deputy president's posts are not likely to be challenged, paving the way for Abdullah and Najib to officially assume the posts.

There will be a vacancy for the vice-president's post with Najib becoming deputy president. The other incumbents Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin will defend their posts. Muhammad confirmed his intentions today.

Wanita Umno president Datuk Paduka Rafidah Aziz said with the expanded Cabinet, new ministers may want to vie for posts.

Rafidah and her deputy Datuk Shahrizat Jalil are not expected to be challenged for the top two Wanita posts.

However, there are expected to be fights for the top posts of the Youth and Puteri wings.

It is not clear whether Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, who is now Education Minister, wants to seek the higher post of vice-president or defend his Umno Youth presidency.

Puteri Umno chief Datuk Azalina Othman Said has breached the 40-year age limit and will give up her post to possibly seek a seat on the supreme council. There are many interested candidates for her job in Puteri.

Branch and divisional elections will precede the elections for the party supreme council seats, and in the Wanita, Youth as well as Puteri wings.

Another matter high on this Sunday's agenda is a review of Umno's performance in the general election and the role of saboteurs from within the ranks.

Former supreme council member and ex-Pasir Mas Umno head Datuk Ibrahim Ali will be among the first to face a lifetime expulsion for standing as an independent against the BN.

Ibrahim lost in the elections but he acted as a spoiler, causing Umno to lose two state seats within that parliamentary constituency. If Umno had won the two seats, it would have formed the State Government in Kelantan.

The other is Sabah's John Ghani, who contested and won as an independent in the Kuala Penyu state seat.

Umno amended its constitution to allow for lifetime bans on saboteurs and renegade party members.

Council member Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad expects the issue of money politics to be brought up in view of the forthcoming party elections.

"With the new administration's emphasis on a clean and credible Government, there is all the more reason to discuss this," he said.

The appointment of the new Umno secretary-general will also be made at the meeting. Kangar Umno division chief Datuk Radzi Sheikh Ahmad is tipped to replace retiring secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob.