

**Pak Lah should press 'nuclear button'**  
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**Ong Kian Ming and Oon Yeoh**

analysis In the last year of a two-term US president, he is usually considered a lame duck president, referring to his inability to pass any significant legislation because of the lack of political capital.

We argue that if even if Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi manages to somehow survive beyond the December Umno general assembly, he would most likely be a lame duck prime minister for the rest of his term.

abdullah ahmad badawi pak lah concerned worried There is already mounting pressure on Abdullah to set a timetable for a succession plan with specific timelines and dates spelt out. Many of Umno's top leaders have thrown their support behind Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak.

Abdullah himself has come out to say that he would eventually pass on the reins to Najib. The question here is if Abdullah wants to serve out another full term (three to four years let's say) before handing over that position to Najib or whether he will be pressured to set a much shorter deadline of between one to two years.

It is extremely unlikely that Abdullah can maintain the support of a majority of Umno leaders if he insists on staying the full term. Their support of Abdullah at the general assembly will be contingent on Abdullah setting a relatively short handover timetable. Abdullah, not noted for being confrontational, unlike his belligerent predecessor, will probably accede to such a request. Although he would prefer to have a full term as the PM, he will probably have to settle for much less.

Hence, we will be faced with the reality of a short-term PM who will have all the appendages of a lame duck. He has already lost political capital as a result of the disastrous 2008 election results. He faces an Umno grassroots that is rabidly against him and a leadership that is increasingly fractured and itching for a fight for the top post.

Most importantly, once he announces the succession timetable, many of the Umno leaders as well as Barisan Nasional component party leaders will be looking to Najib for leadership and direction rather than Abdullah. They would be looking to Najib to spell out how he will fight off Pakatan Rakyat, rebuild Umno and lead BN to a convincing victory in the next general elections.

Ministers, civil servants and business leaders will continue to pay lip service to Abdullah and give him due respect as a PM, but his ability to push through significant legislative measures or make certain appointments will be severely circumscribed. If Abdullah, with a 91% control of parliament could not follow through with his 2004 electoral promises, what can he realistically do with only 63% of parliamentary seats and five states under opposition control?

Many people will no doubt point out that his predecessor Dr Mahathir Mohamad also had a long goodbye yet he was by no means a lame duck. The similarities are only superficial. Mahathir differed from Abdullah in two important respects.

Firstly, he managed to deflect Anwar's challenge by safely winning more than two-thirds of parliamentary seats in 1999. Secondly, up until the last minute, there was uncertainty as to whether he would actually step down as PM and let Abdullah take over. Both these reasons ensured that Mahathir was not a lame duck although he had a succession timetable in place.

It would seem like Abdullah is caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. If he doesn't set a timetable, there will continue to be unrest within Umno. If he sets a timetable, he becomes a lame duck. In many ways, he's damned if he does and he's damned if he doesn't.

### **Use the 'nuclear' option**

Given this reality, it might be in Abdullah's interest to leave a strong political legacy by exercising a 'nuclear' option. Imagine if he were to institute a series of far-ranging legislative reforms by co-opting the opposition MPs and using the strength of public opinion.

Why not abolish the ISA (Internal Security Act), reform the UUCA (Universities and Universiti Colleges Act), give the Election Commission actual independence, get rid of the PPPA (Printing Presses and Publications Act), and so on?

Surely there will be strong resistance from within his cabinet and Umno and probably within BN as well. But it would be hard for them to block such moves if Abdullah really goes all out for it and positions these actions as a response to the GE 2008 results.

No doubt this is political suicide for him but if his days as PM are already numbered, why not go out in a blaze of glory? In one fell swoop, he would be seen as a greater PM than even Mahathir and he would have the satisfaction of denying his nemesis Anwar Ibrahim the chance to be the man turn Malaysia into a true democracy.

Unfortunately, nothing about Abdullah tells us he will do anything remotely close to this. His much-hailed proposals for judicial reforms do not look impressive in the cold light of day. The setting up of a judicial commission still puts the ultimately authority to nominate judges in the hands of the PM.

In any event, this commission might take a long time to set up. An esteemed lawyer reminded us in a recent blog posting that it took seven years for Suhakam to be set up. Even then, it did not have any real teeth in influencing policy.

The radical legislative measures we suggested above could be carried out in a much shorter time frame. And for each of them, he can count on 82 opposition MPs backing it fully.

These are exactly the kind of reforms that everyone had hoped he would do the first time around. It's now pretty late in the game now, and the window of opportunity is fast closing, but he can still do it if he wants to. Don't hold your breath, though.