

The battle for Umno supremacy
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Even before Umno branches begin their meetings this month, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has apparently sown up nominations from his home state of Penang to defend his party presidency.
MCPX

All 13 division leaders at the Penang Umno liaison committee meeting on Saturday have unanimously decided to nominate Abdullah as the party chief and Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak as deputy for another term.

The startling announcement was made by committee deputy chief Abdul Rashid Abdullah after emerging from a three-hour meeting chaired by Abdullah, who is incidentally the state liaison chief.

bn component party polls 080708The question on everyone's lips is 'why so soon' since nominations for party posts would only be made when Umno's 191 divisions hold their annual general meetings (AGM) in October. Before that, its 10,000 branches would be having their respective AGMs from mid-July.

Clearly, Abdullah is not taking his chances.

Obviously, he wants to ensure that all the president's men would grab the leadership in the upcoming branch polls, which in turn will dominate the division leadership and this will inevitably lead to nominations.

Many see a certain Kelantan prince from Gua Musang, veteran party leader Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, to fight for Umno supremacy in the December party polls.

The more dangerous challenger

But reliable party sources indicated that the premier was in a hurry to secure as many nominations possible because of another potential challenger.

najib abdullah 100408He is none other than Najib, who has been working hard laying out the groundwork to capture the president's seat.

Najib's plan is simple - get more nominations than Abdullah for the president post, enough to show the incumbent he should go without a contest. His running mate is likely to be party vice-president Muhyiddin Yassin.

Najib agents have been moving up and down the country to convince Umno division leaders to secure their boss more than 50 percent, or a minimum 100 nominations, for the Umno presidency.

"If Najib could muster it, Abdullah may have to step down because he had fewer nominations than his deputy," explained an Umno leader from Penang.

umno party post polls quota Under Umno rules, a member must muster 30 percent, or 58 nominations, from the party's 191 divisions to be eligible to contest for the top post. For the deputy president, one has to get 20 percent nominations.

Abdullah however is not sitting on his hands either.

A party leader from Kedah said Abdullah had been sending words to Umno divisions across the country to give him a big mandate to continue as party president, which traditionally ensures premiership so long Umno has federal power.

Sensing Najib's imminent coup de tat, Abdullah's agents too are working hard in Penang and elsewhere to secure large chunk of division nominations for their boss.

Some state leaders are expected to emulate Penang Umno's decision in the coming weeks, but a majority of the division heads would prefer to 'wait and see' before deciding on who to pick.

Abdullah is however expected to still defend his president's post even if he received only a minimum number of nominations or another Umno leader has received sufficient nominations to challenge him.

"But it will be embarrassing for the premier to scrap through with minimum nominations," said a Perak leader.

Najib plans to overwhelm Pak Lah

Sources also said the president had been well-informed that his political opponents would spend millions to secure more than enough nominations for the top two posts to embarrass Abdullah and seize power without a challenge.

But if Plan A fails to work, Najib's camp has a plan B to compel Abdullah to set a specific date for the eventual transfer of power by 2010.

Najib's moves have received widespread support from Umno politicians, who see the party number two as more-than-qualified to take over the reigns.

But of late, the deputy premier's image has been tainted by the mystery murder of Mongolian model Altantuya Shariibuu.

Party members are utterly confused with unanswered questions surrounding the murder case.

"Prior to these controversies, Najib could have secured more than half of Kedah's 15 divisional nominations, but his reputation has since suffered a severe setback," said an Umno politician from the state.

The deputy premier's agents however are already working out plans to counter the allegations to reduce the impact of the scandal on Umno divisional nominations and delegates attending the Umno general assembly at year end.

Abdullah, while pleasing and charming for many Umno members, is being blamed - to certain extent - for inaction in handling controversies such as the Altantuya murder case.

He is viewed as 'ineffective and indecisive' in handling the statutory declaration drama staged by private investigator P Balasubramaniam or Pakatan Rakyat de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim's constant attacks against Najib and the government.

Abdullah is also seen as listening too much to his family members and a handful of self-interest advisors in decision-making.

But as prime minister, he is not adverse in using the enormous power of incumbency to get backing from Umno powerbrokers.

Umno's 'born to rule' mentality

He is actively looking after the 'welfare' of Umno division leaders in the five Pakatan Rakyat states and those who have lost their power such as former menteri besar Shahidan Kassim of Perlis and Idris Jusoh of Terengganu.

Although both Shahidan and Idris were forced to relinquish their government positions, nonetheless the duo still command influential grassroots support.

Umno leaders and members have been living with the 'born to rule' mentality, monopolising power and business without being questioned by anyone.

But since the March 8 watershed general election, the ruling party could no longer do things according to its 'whims and fancies.'

Party leaders are aghast with the new situation and they do not know whether to blame Abdullah, the party president or Najib, the Barisan Nasional election operations chief.

However, they are sure to vent their anger and frustration at Umno branch AGMs this month, kick-starting a five-month political drama that could possibly end with a new leader at the helm.

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