

Umno meets amid handover speculation
Malaysiakini.com
Jul 10, 2008

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi met with leaders of his ruling party today amid speculation he will announce a plan to step down June 2010.
MCPX

Abdullah has faced calls to quit since the March elections that handed the opposition unprecedented gains, and a fuel price hike that has triggered public outrage and a series of protests.

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and division and branch leaders of Umno - whose support Abdullah needs to stay in power - were due to be briefed by the premier and his deputy Najib Razak.

"The PM and DPM have been meeting over the issue of a transition of power," a senior UMNO official told AFP.

"It is expected that the PM will make an announcement after meeting with senior Umno leaders on his plan to hand over power to Najib, and the dates of the handover could range from as early as June 2009 to 2010."

"The exact date is expected to have been decided on by the two before they met with the Umno leaders," he said.

A political website, Malaysian Insider, cited unnamed party officials as saying Abdullah would unveil a plan to hand over to Najib in June 2010, in an effort to reduce political uncertainty.

It said his announcement would likely see Abdullah and Najib return unopposed as the party's top leaders in the December polls, averting any challenge by disgruntled elements inside Umno.

Umno secretary-general Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor said he was unaware of any handover decision, but an aide to the deputy prime minister told AFP he had been informed that "something important" was to be announced at the meeting.

Astonishing political brawl

Political uncertainty since the March elections, which has hurt Malaysia's financial markets, was heightened after opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim said he was poised to seize power with the help of government defectors.

Anwar and Najib are now gripped in an astonishing political brawl, with both facing serious misconduct accusations that could decide who will be the next prime minister.

Anwar faces new allegations of sodomy - the same charge he was jailed on more than a decade ago - which he says were fabricated by the government, and Najib has been forced to deny accusations that he had an affair with a Mongolian woman who was murdered in 2006.

The opposition alliance today filed a motion in parliament seeking to hold a debate on the "loss of confidence" in the Barisan Nasional coalition government, which is led by Umno.

"The public has lost confidence in the integrity of the government," said Anwar's wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who leads his Keadilan party.

"The people are now facing a huge crisis, having to bear the burden of expensive fuel, the higher cost of food and basic needs. The parliament should debate this motion," she said.

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