

Najib worse off with two-year transition
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At first glance, it would seem that Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak should be happy at Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's announcement that he will hand over power in the middle of 2010. But dig a little deeper and you would find that the announcement actually only further cements the precarious political situation that Najib finds himself in.
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British Prime Minister Harold Wilson famously said that 'one week is a long time in politics'. As we've seen lately, a lot can transpire within just a few days. Two years can be an eternity in political terms.

umno special briefing abdullah ahmad badawi announce resignation date 100708 04By announcing a firm schedule for stepping down, Abdullah has bought himself some time. This removes some of the pressure from those within Umno who want him to commit firmly to passing the baton to Najib.

It also gives him ample time to rebuild his support base as well as provide ample time for Najib's enemies – be they from de facto PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim's camp or from Abdullah's – to further weaken the already embattled DPM.

Nothing that Abdullah has said and done post-election has indicated that he's willing to step down from his current position as Umno president or PM. If he genuinely wants to step down, he could easily do so in December at the Umno General Assembly. He doesn't have to wait two years.

The reason he gives for wanting to wait until 2010 is that he has unfinished business – ostensibly the reforms that he had promised to institute. Given that he failed to institute any major reforms in four years when he had the biggest mandate in history, it's hard to imagine that it's possible for him to achieve anything in two years while in his weakened state. So that rationale is just plain disingenuous.

Unlike his predecessor Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is very much his own man and left office more or less on his own terms, Abdullah seems very much like a PM who is hanging on to power with the aid of his inner coterie.

Announcement is to buy Abdullah time

That is why we believe the two-year timetable is just a tactic to buy him time. There are too many people in his camp who have too much to lose if Abdullah is no longer PM and they will use this two-year time frame to shore him up simultaneously while working to weaken his deputy.

najib and saiful bukhari azlanNajib was already in a beleaguered position before the transition date announcement. His name had been mentioned in one statutory declaration, later retracted, and his wife, Rosmah, in another. He had also admitted having a private meeting with the alleged victim in the Anwar sodomy case, before the police reports were made. All this has tainted his image badly.

Since two years is a long time, it is possible for Najib to rehabilitate himself somewhat. If no one comes up with proof of his or Rosmah's involvement in the Altantuya Shaariibuu case, and if no one can directly link him to the sodomy allegations, he can somewhat salvage his reputation.

But even then, it doesn't mean he will take over after Abdullah. Mahathir has already said that Najib will not become PM in 2010 because some forces close to Abdullah will topple him by then. We more or less agree with that assessment.

Given that Najib surely knows Abdullah's underlying motive for this announcement – he may be timid but he's not stupid – what can he possibly do to fight back? The answer is nothing much.

He is a man battling two fronts. On one flank stands Anwar, who blames him for the sodomy allegations, and on the other flank stands Abdullah's camp, who recognise Najib for what he is: the most serious threat to Abdullah's position.

It is hard to imagine that he would be able to make any political moves against Anwar. Any explicit moves on Najib's part would be perceived as him taking an active role in the political 'conspiracy' against Anwar. Furthermore, he might not have control of the instruments of power which can be used to threaten or silence Anwar, at least when it comes to his attacks on Najib.

The person who has access to these levers of state power, Abdullah, has shown that he is more than happy to sit back and watch his two biggest rivals – Anwar and Najib – battle it out with each other.

Najib's hands are tied

There's not much Najib can do against Abdullah either. Because a handover schedule has been announced, he no longer has any excuse to challenge him during the Umno General Assembly in December.

The best that his people can do is to tacitly support a potential challenger to Abdullah – either Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah or Muhyiddin Yassin – so that Abdullah would get embroiled in a bruising battle for survival.

Abdullah would probably prevail given the powers of incumbency but he would emerge even further weakened than he is now. But even this is not a politically attractive option. There are risks. What if either Razaleigh or Muhyiddin wins? There goes any hope for Najib to become PM.

In short, Najib is now a man with very few options. And that is why we say that the firm timeline for handing over power – though on the surface might seem like a win for Najib – is actually bad news for him.

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