

Najib seen backtracking on transition pact
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In a surprise turnaround, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said today he would leave it to Umno party members to decide if they wanted to accept a power transition pact knocked out between himself and Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi whereby the latter would hand over the top job in both the country and party to him by 2010.

"As everybody knows, the transition plan was decided upon in July by the prime minister and myself and was endorsed by the Umno supreme council.

umno ahmad ismail mt meet 100908 abdullah najib pcI've held meetings with the Umno divisional chiefs and I've stated that the plan must get the support of the Umno divisions, especially at this year's delegates meetings," Najib was quoted as saying by Bernama.

"So, because Umno is a party that practises democracy, the matter must be decided by the party members through its internal process, namely at the divisions' annual meetings," he said.

Political watchers interviewed by Malaysiakini viewed the latest development as the strongest signal so far that the 68-year old Abdullah's time in power might be nearing an end.

"The atmosphere in Umno is really getting toxic," said Jacob Ramsay, political analyst for Southeast Asia at Singapore-based Control Risks Group.

"The situation there is getting dynamic, bordering on volatile."

Najib's comment comes hot on the heels of a statement by International Trade and Industry Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who said on Wednesday Abdullah should rethink the 2010 deadline on the basis it was too faraway to be tenable.

Muhyiddin, an Umno vice-president, had set the ball rolling when he disclosed earlier this week he was among a group that invited ex-premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad to return to the party.

The 64-year old Muhyiddin, a former Johor chief minister, was favoured to run as Najib's number two in party elections due this December, but the latter's transition pact with Abdullah scuttled his chances.

Umno at crossroads

While Muhyiddin was careful to soothe Abdullah's feelings, he nevertheless made it clear that Umno was at a crossroads and it was imperative for the party's survival that Najib took over sooner.

muhyiddin yassin malaysian service development council pc 090908 03"We are no longer able to convince the people, and this is a serious matter," Muhyiddin told reporters, while attending the same conference as Najib this morning.

"Najib has the strength and capability, and with support from other leaders and Barisan, we can make a proper plan to regain the people's confidence," Muhyiddin was quoted as saying by the Star.

Mahathir, who still wields substantial influence, quit Umno in May after falling out with Abdullah. He has not confirmed his return to the party he presided over for 22 years, having previously vowed not to come back until there was a leadership change in the party.

Nevertheless, he found unexpected support from another party stalwart - Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. The 71-year Razaleigh, better known by his short name of Ku Li, too hit the headlines this week.

"If the president was shocked when Muhyiddin called for the power transition to be hastened, I was more shocked when such a transition was proposed," Ku Li said at a 'buka puasa' function in Muar yesterday.

"Leaders also cannot determine how long they want to stay, but they can step down whenever they like," he added.

Ku Li, who challenged Mahathir for the Umno presidency in 1987, resigned when he lost - leaving to form his own Semangat 46 party. Long known to be bitter foes, Ku Li created ripples in party circles when news broke he was also in the group that went to persuade the fiery 82-year old to return to Umno.

Speculation swirled that Ku Li - a former finance minister - might team up with Muhyiddin as his number two to challenge Abdullah and Najib.

Ku Li still in the running

Despite the latest rhetoric, analysts are still unsure how the chips will ultimately fall.

tengku razaleigh forum 260408 ku li speaking While Muhyiddin appeared to support Najib, they said it was still possible for him to throw in his lot with Ku Li, especially if the deputy premier changed his mind again and backed off from challenging his boss for the top post.

They said Muhyiddin had nothing to lose and probably would try to shackle Ku Li into an arrangement whereby the latter would be prime minister for only one term.

"There is no indication yet that Muhyiddin is willing to back Ku Li the same like Mahathir, unless Ku Li makes a commitment that he will see this term and hand the reins to Muhyiddin by the next general election," political analyst Khoo Kay Peng told Malaysiakini.

The embattled Abdullah, who took over in 2004, has been blamed for the ruling coalition's weak performance during the March general elections. His failure to nip in the bud a recent string of controversies including the recent outcry against a minor division chief, Ahmad Ismail, for making racial slurs against the Chinese community has further undermined his political standing.

Seen as a 'Mr Nice Guy', Abdullah has nevertheless resisted with surprising strength widespread pressure to unseat him.

"I am not staying on just for the pleasure of staying on. I tell you this is not a work I can regard as a pleasure, there are a lot of responsibilities and problems that need to be attended to, as well as programmes that I have already indicated that I will do my best to complete," the visibly upset prime minister had said when told that Muhyiddin had called for him to step down sooner.

Youth Chief Hishammuddin Hussein too joined in the fray today calling for major reform within Umno and welcoming Mahathir back to the party.

But while party insiders believe the most probable winners would be a Najib-Muhyiddin team come December, they also doubted the deputy premier's ability to reform the badly divided Umno - the most powerful political party in the country until its disastrous showing in the March national polls.

mahathir pc 260608 05"With the support of Muhyiddin and Dr Mahathir's factions, Ku Li may get closer to his wish to contest the president's post. Victory however is not in sight," said Khoo.

"Najib is a status-quo politician. I don't see him as a reformer, someone who can overhaul Umno. The true reformer is another prime minister-in-the-waiting, someone still waiting in the wings, waiting to emerge. We don't know who that person is yet, but perhaps in another two years or so," said Ramsay.

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