

PM's fate rests with Umno divisions
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Never before has the position of prime minister of Malaysia come under such pressure from within and without his own party, the Malay-based Umno.

For the second time in 48 hours since Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim failed to make good his claim of a new federal government, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has found himself facing the uncertainty of a coup within his own party.

However, in a quick and even desperate move to quell unrest ahead of the Umno supreme council meeting tomorrow, Abdullah today gave up a portfolio to which he has clung tenaciously since he assumed power in November 2003.

At a hastily-arranged press conference at his office this afternoon, the premier officially swapped the more illustrious portfolio of finance for Najib Abdul Razak's defence position.

abdullah ahmad badawi pak lah pissed More than that, the premier hinted that he may step down earlier than 2010 depending on Najib's performance.

But read together with the statement that "both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the 2010 power transition plan", there appear to be some inconsistencies.

The duo stressed that they would defend their respective positions in Umno come the party polls in December.

But is this the end to Abdullah's bid to hang on to the nation's top job? And are we expected to believe that Abdullah and Najib will still walk hand-in-hand as president and deputy president on Dec 19?

While there is no doubt that some of the pressure would have been relieved by the time Umno's highest body meets at 3pm tomorrow, the beleaguered Abdullah cannot yet claim to be able to see light at the end of the political tunnel.

At the crux of calls by his critics is for Abdullah to step down by December. Just as in July when the idea of a handover in 2010 first took shape, his critics will again say he is taking too long to go.

His predecessor Dr Mahathir Mohamad even suggested in his blog then that "although Najib was promised that a transition would take place in 2010, all kinds of accusations will be hurled at him so that Najib would appear unfit to even be deputy prime minister".

Watching and waiting

Reading between the lines, many seem to be taking a wait-and-see approach.

Najib underlined the consistency of his comments, saying today: "We have agreed. I'm leaving it to the party. We are offering ourselves to the party and I hope that they will accept".

Strangely but again consistently, the deputy premier did not say what has been agreed upon and exactly how the agreement will be left to the party.

It is worth noting that, when Najib was asked to comment on Umno veep Muhyiddin Yassin's earlier call for Abdullah to quit, his remarks were nonchalant.

While those close to Abdullah, such as Kota Bharu division member Zaid Ibrahim, called on Muhyiddin to resign, Najib stayed clear of the debate.

najib making a point Instead Najib told Bernama: "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.

"I'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.

"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."

Commenting on today's swapping of portfolios, minister in charge of parliamentary affairs Mohd Nazri Abdul Aziz said: "It's a natural exchange...and part of the process for transfer of powers."

Asked how it might impact on Umno, he said: "For the supreme council, this is in line with the 2010 plan endorsed earlier. But at the same time Umno is a party governed by democracy. So what the supreme council endorses is only a guiding principle.

"This will be left to the divisions to decide. We (in the supreme council) cannot take away the power away from the divisions."

For Abdullah, Najib and another president aspirant Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, nothing has changed.

Divisional meetings from Oct 9 to Nov 9 will decide whether the handover will be in June 2010 or whether it will be brought forward to Dec 19, 2008.

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