

Abdullah moves quickly to shore up power
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Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who this afternoon swapped his finance portfolio for his deputy's defence post, is seen moving quickly to shore up power ahead of challenges to his political position both from within and outside his Umno party.

Political watchers interviewed by Malaysiakini said the latest political footwork was aimed at bringing in line dissenting camps within Umno and to curtail the growing strength of Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim, who has threatened to form a new government soon.

"I am not sure about Anwar but this is a good move for Umno that should help the top party leadership to close ranks," said veteran Umno watcher Mustapha Ong.

Abdullah is giving Najib and his supporters what they want. The concern has been that Najib may have no choice but to contest against Abdullah if the divisions keep nominating him.

"But now I think Najib supporters can wholeheartedly go to the ground and tell them Najib won't accept even if they nominate. It is very clear now that he will stand by Abdullah," he added.

The 68-year old Abdullah sprung a surprise today when he announced at a hastily-convened press conference that he would hand over the coveted finance minister post to Najib, while at the same time assuming the latter's defence minister portfolio.

The swap, although talked about in Umno inner circles for some time, caught Malaysians by surprise, sparking rumours that Abdullah, known for his simplicity and soft ways, was trying to consolidate power.

Mounting challenge from Anwar

Abdullah has been at the centre of a political maelstrom, caught by bitter infighting in Umno and a mounting challenge from the Anwar-led Pakatan Rakyat to overthrow his ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

"Anwar has taken it so far, he has thrown down the gauntlet. It is clear is he is not going to just let it go," said Vishnu Varathan, analyst at Forecast Singapore Pte Ltd.

"Even if there is no change in government now, you can't rule it out in the next few months. There are also growing signs of cracks in Umno, what with Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) returning. Any weakness there will be open invitation for attacks from the opposition," Vishnu added.

At today's press conference, Abdullah described Anwar as a threat to national security and said he should be punished for "lying to the public and confusing the people".

A party insider however denied Abdullah's assumption of the Defence Ministry was a prelude to arresting Anwar under the country's draconian Internal Security Act.

"We think Anwar should be arrested for all the mind games he is playing on the people but the Defence Ministry is not about that. Abdullah has been in defence before, so it is a natural exchange," the party veteran said.

Nevertheless, speculation is abuzz especially after blogger Syed Azidi Syed Abdul Aziz was arrested this afternoon under the Sedition Act. Last week, Abdullah launched a shock crackdown, detaining two journalists and an opposition politician under the ISA, which allows for detention without trial.

A decision by the Sabah Progressive Party - which has previously said it was open to joining the Pakatan - to pull out of the Barisan is expected to pile further pressure on Abdullah.

Trade-off

Observers also said Abdullah - under siege to quit after a recent string of controversies - was also seeking to assure Najib his accession to the premiership would not be affected, and also to deflect a campaign led by ex-premier Mahathir to unseat him from the Umno presidency.

khairy jamaluddin announce umno youth top post challenge 170908 01Party insiders now expect Najib and his supporters to throw their lot behind Abdullah and his son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin, who is gunning to be the Umno Youth chief. Khairy faces a challenge from Mukhriz Mahathir, the youngest son of the 82-year old ex-premier.

"Some divisions are expected to nominate other candidates but if Najib sticks with Abdullah, they are a formidable team. This is the power of incumbency," said Khoo Kay Peng, an independent political analyst.

"It is a trade-off. For Abdullah, it is not about clinging on. He is not power crazy but it is more to satisfy his supporters and also to help Khairy consolidate his place in Umno," Mustapha added.

Last week, Najib and his cabinet colleague, International Trade and Industry Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, caused a stir with statements distancing themselves from their boss.

Muhyiddin, who called on Abdullah to step down, also invited Mahathir - Abdullah's former mentor-turned-foe - to return to Umno. At the same time, Najib backed away from a power transition pact made with his boss in July, whereby the latter would pass to him the premiership and Umno presidency in June 2010.

Meanwhile, the outspoken and feisty Mahathir, who still wields considerable influence in the party, has been rallying support from Umno members to dislodge Abdullah, whom he blames for weakening the country with his soft leadership.

Consultation

However, according to the party insider, Mahathir, who runs his own blog, has been persuaded to come around and "hold his tongue".

muhyiddin yassin malaysian service development council pc 090908 04"It is not just between Najib and Abdullah. It doesn't work that way in Umno. Mahathir, Muhyiddin and

Tengku Razaleigh (Hamzah) have all been consulted and they are not going to go against this latest move for the sake of party unity," the Umno veteran said.

"Everyone gets something and their supporters get going to the ground to spread the word. Mukhriz may have to settle for number two post behind Khairy but at least his position is assured and eventually both he and Khairy will be made ministers," he said.

Umno vice-president Muhyiddin, previously favoured to run as Najib's deputy in the December elections, is also expected to fall in line.

"He will become the senior vice-president," said Mustapha. "That should be fine with him as he will become Najib's number two when Abdullah retires."

Among the Umno leaders eyeing the top posts, the 71-year old Tengku Razaleigh may possibly end up with the least, but analysts said his rapport with party grassroots was weak to start with.

They do not expect him to stand much chance without Muhyiddin leaving the Najib camp to come to his side and compete as his number two against Abdullah.

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