

PM under new pressure to resign
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Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is under increasing pressure to quit, after being confronted by rare criticism from within his cabinet, as well as an opposition bid to seize power.

So far Abdullah has clung tenaciously to the job, and refused to negotiate with Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim, who has announced he has enough support from defecting lawmakers to topple the government.

But last week Abdullah faced an unprecedented challenge from within his cabinet, as four ministers spoke out against him at the Umno supreme council meeting.

They told Abdullah at a meeting of the party's supreme council that "the political situation was not improving and that he should consider an earlier exit".

Umno information chief Muhammad Taib confirmed the challenge took place and said Abdullah was saddened and visibly affected by it, but insisted he could ride out the crisis.

"The four of them spoke and said this to the prime minister... but it was not the majority speaking. There are more than 30 supreme council members and not all are in unison, asking the PM to resign," Muhammad told AFP.

"He listened. It was not the first time for him. He has his own intelligence report well prepared on what the feeling is at the grassroots level," he said.

Abdullah in July unveiled a plan to hand over to his deputy Najib Razak in mid-2010, but the strategy failed to quell calls for his ouster, and last week he indicated the timing was "flexible" and that he could depart earlier.

He handed over the important Finance Ministry post to Najib in a show of solidarity, but was hit with the challenge from his ministers just a day later.

Pak Lah's position 'untenable'

An Umno official from Abdullah's home state of Penang said the premier's position was now untenable and he would have to quit before the party holds leadership elections in December.

"Abdullah does not have any choice left. He has to go by year-end," said the senior official on condition of anonymity.

"Abdullah is now being viewed as a leader who has lost control of the party and government.

"He cannot make any drastic moves to reel in party leaders who have openly gone against him by questioning the power transition agreement," he said.

muhyiddin yassin malaysian service development council pc 090908 02Najib is widely tipped to replace Abdullah, with his new deputy likely to be Trade Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who has been one of the premier's most outspoken critics.

Muhyiddin was one of the ministers who reportedly challenged Abdullah at last week's meeting, along with Umno's youth wing chief Hishammuddin Hussein, women's wing chief Rafidah Aziz and Culture Minister Shafie Apdal.

He is now a 'lame duck' PM

The meeting took place after a series of blows, including a furore within the 14-party Barisan Nasional over the arrests of an opposition MP, a blogger and a journalist under draconian internal security laws.

Cabinet minister Zaid Ibrahim, who had been appointed to direct a shake-up of the judiciary, quit in disgust after the arrests, saying he had met a "brick wall" in the ruling party which had blocked any reforms.

And last week a small party from Sabah quit the coalition, saying the government had "lost its moral authority to rule".

Lim Kit Siang, a veteran figure in the three-member opposition alliance, called on Abdullah to agree to Anwar's call for an emergency session of parliament to hold a no-confidence vote in his leadership.

He said that after an historic 2004 election victory when voters endorsed his reform agenda, Abdullah had become a "lame duck" both as premier and leader of his party.

"Could it be that Abdullah is not absolutely certain and confident that he could command the support of a majority of 222 MPs in parliament if a no-confidence motion is put to a vote?" he said.

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