

Support for Pak Lah shaky, rumours of a new deal
Malaysiakini.com
Sept 25, 2008
Muda Mohd Noor and Wong Choon Mei

Despite near unanimous support from two states, including his hometown of Penang, embattled Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is not out of the woods yet in his bid to stay on as Umno president.

If a survey on Umno divisions in Johor conducted by Malaysiakini is any indication, then the 68-year-old leader may have only just begun on a rocky journey that could still end in his ouster, despite recent all-out efforts to retain the loyalty of his deputy, Najib Abdul Razak.

Rumours are also abuzz that his detractors are preparing for another showdown, working round-the-clock to convene another emergency supreme council meeting for later this week.

Negotiations are already underway between top party leaders - including Muhammad Muhammad Taib, Mohd Ali Rustam, Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, Hishammuddin Hussein and Muhyiddin Yassin - to prepare the ground for the final battle.

According to a party insider, some of the terms on the table include Abdullah agreeing to step down next year - a year earlier than his stated timeline of 2010.

Other possibilities being negotiated include deferring the party's annual general assembly by another six months to June 2009, where Abdullah would then hand power over to Najib.

Meanwhile, Abdullah is set to visit state divisions across the country in a bid to convince members to not allow the top two party posts to be contested, a sacrifice he claims is necessary to unite the already bitterly-divided party.

Johor and Selangor rebel

But divisions in Johor, the stronghold of Umno southern lion Muhyiddin Yassin, reiterated to Malaysiakini they would allow the outcome for the top two posts to be determined by delegates at the party division meetings due next month.

"If there is to be change in the top leadership, then the party must make the changes without being tied to any timeline," said Ayub Rahmad, Youth chief for Sekijang.

Both Abdullah and Najib agreed in July on a power transfer pact whereby the former would hand over the premiership and Umno presidency to the latter in June 2010.

The plan - pounded by critics as 'undemocratic' when it was unveiled - has since been endorsed by the party's supreme council. Nevertheless, it has come under renewed and even more vigorous attack at next month's division meetings.

Beginning Oct 9, delegates from 191 division across the nation will file their nominations for the party's top posts.

Presidential candidates must win a minimum 58 nominations in order to qualify for election

due to be held during the party assembly in December.

Abdullah, who does not want to be challenged for the No 1 post, moved quickly last week to appease his deputy, conceding his coveted finance portfolio to Najib, along with an assurance that he would also consider an early retirement.

However, dissenters led by former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad want Abdullah to quit now and are pushing Najib to break away from his boss. They want him to go for the top post with Muhyiddin in tow as the deputy presidential candidate.

"We are trying to avoid a political checkmate between the delegates and Abdullah and Najib. It would be a political suicide and terrible for Umno if the delegates reject their pact and show their independence," a party insider told Malaysiakini.

In Johor, committee member for Segamat division, Mohd Azami Othman, said Abdullah should not even think about contesting with Najib as his number two.

"Because of that, it is better we leave it to the majority of delegates to decide on who they want to lead the party," Mohd Azami said.

"I would like to advise Abdullah not to be taken in by reports from sycophantic quarters. In the end, their support may not materialise."

Growing calls for Najib-Muhyiddin team

Ahmad Kemim, committee member of Johor Baru division, also told Malaysiakini a large number of grassroots wanted a Najib-Muhyiddin pairing.

He urged Abdullah to consider their feelings and not insist that they follow blindly the 2010 transition plan.

Meanwhile, Penang and Kelantan division chiefs were among the first to rally behind Abdullah after news leaked he had been humiliated during last week's supreme council meeting.

During that meeting, leaders aligned to the Mahathir camp, including party senior vice-president Muhyiddin, Wanita chief Rafidah, Youth chief Hishammuddin, were said to have demanded his resignation.

In Selangor, 20 out of 22 divisions are also reported to be dead-set against Abdullah's transition plan, while in Perak, Terengganu and Federal Territory, the signals are mixed.

In Perak, up to 10 divisions are said to be keen on an early change in leadership, while another 14 divisions are still waffling, according to latest news reports.

Sources from Abdullah's inner circle have however claimed they are confident of getting at least 70 nominations. The prime minister met the Selangor Umno liaison committee in Tanjong Karang yesterday.

But sources said the party president failed to get the iron-clad commitment he sought from Selangor.

All eyes on Najib

Meanwhile, Najib has maintained a diplomatic silence, despite assuming with gusto his new appointment as finance minister.

The 55-year-old son of the country's second premier, Abdul Razak, had earlier this month backtracked from his promise to stick by Abdullah's timeline and all eyes are now on him to make clear his latest stand.

Just a day ago, Najib cancelled an important trip to New York on the grounds that he needed to focus on his duties in the Finance Ministry.

But while he is scheduled to hold a press conference later today, rumours are rife that he is actually staying back to attend an emergency supreme council meeting that Abdullah's detractors are trying to convene later this week.

"Pak Lah is under renewed pressure to make a gracious exit before Oct 13 at the very latest.

"Both Najib and Muhyiddin are now confident of getting enough nominations for president and deputy president, leaving Pak Lah out in the cold," the party insider said.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/90346>