

Umno to hold emergency meeting
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Top Umno leaders will convene an emergency supreme council meeting tomorrow in the hope of finding a way for Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to make an honourable exit and pass on the baton to his deputy Najib Abdul Razak by early next year.

Umno sources had earlier told Malaysiakini the two main items on tomorrow's agenda would be the controversial 2010 power transition plan and the postponement of the party's annual general assembly, currently slated for Dec 16 to 20.

They also said Abdullah was likely to take long leave, perhaps for a month, from Oct 8 or 9 onwards to refresh himself before returning to prepare Najib for the premiership and party presidency.

Supreme council member and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Nazri Aziz did not comment on the possibility of Abdullah taking leave, but he conceded that Umno was currently split into camps for and against the 68-year old premier.

"It is seldom that such meetings take place so it should be an important one. In light of what is currently occurring, I suspect that the power transition plan will be the agenda for tomorrow's meeting," Nazri told Malaysiakini in a phone interview.

"There are two extremes in Umno on the matter. One extreme are those who want to stick with the 2010 dateline given by Abdullah to step down. The other extreme say he should go earlier, during the divisional meeting scheduled for October," he added.

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.

All will be known by tomorrow

The transition 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 ahead of next month's divisional meetings, sparking factional infighting in the already bitterly divided party.

According to Umno information chief Muhammad Muhammad Taib (left in photo), all members of the supreme council were informed of the meeting only today. However, he declined to shed any light on what the meeting would be about.

"Yes, there will be a meeting tomorrow. I just received a call earlier today that a special supreme council meeting will be held tomorrow," Muhammad said.

"I am in the dark just as you. All I know is I received the phone call and was told to attend the meeting tomorrow morning," he added.

Meanwhile, Najib also confirmed the meeting would be held tomorrow, telling reporters who swamped him with "political questions" to wait another 24 hours for the answers.

"Political questions will only be answered tomorrow," Najib said.

The 25-member supreme council is the top decision-making body in Umno, the country's most powerful political party.

It usually meets on monthly basis and during last week's meeting, a furore erupted when news leaked that several leaders, aligned to former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad, had openly demanded Abdullah's resignation.

Led by vice-president Muhyiddin Yassin and Youth chief Hishammuddin Hussein, a number of top leaders warned Abdullah that he may not be able to get the minimum 58 nominations needed to defend his presidency.

Umno's 191 divisions begin their annual meetings on Oct 9, when they will also nominate candidates for the top posts.

AGM likely to be postponed

Another hot topic on the agenda is the postponement of party polls to next year to enable Abdullah to remain Umno president and prime minister until the handover.

Deferred once before by the party due to the March 8 general elections, the Umno annual general assembly is to take place from Dec 16 to 20.

Party watchers are divided over when the assembly will be postponed to, but most believe it will take place early next year possibly in March rather than June given the groundswell of support for a fast leadership change.

"I suspect that this will also be discussed tomorrow and I believe that the postponement would act as the dateline for Abdullah to step down," said Nazri.