

**AGM postponed, PM may quit in March**  
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**Beh Lih Yi**

The Umno supreme council dealt a blow to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi by putting off party polls and its annual general meeting to March next year in

the bid to force the party leader to hand over power to his deputy in six months.

At the Umno supreme council special meeting on Sept 26, Abdullah, 68, who is also prime minister, had earlier said he would hand over power to his 55-year-old deputy, Najib Abdul Razak, in two years' time.

The hour-long emergency supreme council meeting held this morning at Umno headquarters in the Putra World Trade Centre, Kuala Lumpur, also resolved to go ahead with the divisional meetings, which are scheduled from Oct 9 to Nov 9.

The meetings of the 191 party divisions, in addition to electing divisional-level leaders, will also pick the 2,500 delegates to the AGM and nominate candidates for top leadership posts.

The ruling party's annual meeting, along with party elections, was originally scheduled to be held in December.

Speaking to reporters after the emergency meeting, Abdullah refused to comment on whether he would defend his president post at the party polls in March.

He said he would make his decision before the divisions begin their meetings on Oct 9 - giving himself two weeks to decide on the matter.

"I have not announced any decision as far as this particular point is concerned, I intend to do it before the division meetings begin," said the Umno No 1, who was flanked by Najib and secretary-general Tengku Adnan Mansor.

Pressed on the matter, he replied: "It will be my decision, you can go on guessing."

His decision not to bid for the top party post in March will allow for a smooth and untroubled transition.

However, should he stick to his early decision to defend his party presidency, the issue of succession will again be thrown into turmoil.

Abdullah conceded that several members of the supreme council were pushing him to quit.

"This (postponement of the AGM) is to facilitate an early transition," he added, hinting that he may step down at the party meeting in March.

**Abdullah fumbles for answers**

Both Abdullah and Najib were seen smiling throughout the nine-minute press conference, packed with about 100 journalists, but the intense pressures on the premier to quit left

Abdullah fumbling for answers when questioned by journalists.

The prime minister had to seek help from Najib, who was sitting next to him, when asked on why the party polls had to be delayed to March next year.

"Err... memberi apa... apa perkataan tadi... laluan.. (Err... give what... what's the word just now... way...)," he said, before turning to Najib, who whispered "to facilitate an early transition".

Abdullah then looked up to the reporters and said: "This is to facilitate an early transition."

Earlier at the press conference, when announcing that the Umno polls had been postponed to next March, he too sought confirmation from Najib on whether he got the correct month.

However, no actual dates have been given for the AGM, but according to Umno information chief Muhammad Muhd Taib, the general assembly will be held at the end of March.

Abdullah denied he was under pressure to quit.

"It has nothing to do with that," he said, adding that his consideration on when to quit is related to his yet-to-be-completed tasks as prime minister.

On whether any supreme council member has told him to leave, he said: "No, Nothing (like that) happened. Maybe there are two, three who felt such way but most of them has no reason to pressure (me) because they know I have a cordial relation with Najib."

On whether the 2010 deadline is still on, he would only said: "If (the transition) is brought forward, then 2010 is off."

The original Umno transition deal was for the power transfer to happen in June 2010.

### **'I love my party'**

Meanwhile, when asked whether he was ready to make the 'ultimate sacrifice' to quit early if the move would be better for the party, Abdullah appeared to be on the defensive.

"As far as I am concerned, I love my party. Even in the most difficult circumstances, I never left. I did not join Umno 46 (Semangat 46), I never joined any other party, I never been on the platform of an opposition party to speak against Umno," he responded.

The premier also said he did not intend to go on leave between now and next March.

To a question on whether the decision to further put off the Umno polls will upset the party grassroots, Abdullah said the decision was already accepted by everyone in the supreme council.

The party elections was postponed once before - Umno was to hold party polls last year but this was put off so that its leaders could focus on fighting the March 8 general election.

In recent weeks, Abdullah has come under tremendous pressure to bring forward the power transfer as early as this December.

This was the second time that the powerful 25-member supreme council met this month - the last meeting was a week ago.

At that meeting, several senior party leaders had urged Abdullah to step down before Oct 9 so as to 'save Abdullah from the embarrassment' of failing to get enough nominations to contest the party presidency.

Abdullah will need at least 58 nominations from the party divisions should he want to defend his president post.

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