

**In for a hectic week as PM decides**  
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Malaysians are bracing for another week of high drama as leaders in the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition - in particular Umno - get on their mark for a power grab that may for the first time hinge more on competition rather than patronage.

"It is part of the continuing process of democratising since the March 8 general election. A Pandora's box has been opened so to speak, only this time what's coming out is a breath of fresh air," Ramon Navaratnam, chairman of Asian Strategic Leadership Institute, told Malaysiakini.

"They are now facing up to the realities of the day. Competition is the word, no more patronage and if it extends to the rest of the system in country, to the economy, it would be even better."

On the main table are none other than the presidency and vice-presidency of Umno, which by tradition comes with the premiership and deputy premiership in tow.

Second-line Umno leaders, previously coy about their ambitions, are now making a beeline to contest the No 2 post held by Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak.

Glaringly less sought after is the crown jewel - the presidency that is widely expected to be given up by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in favour of his deputy. However, that might change soon.

Umno insiders told Malaysiakini that members increasingly did not want any party, including Abdullah or Najib, to corral off the topmost post from being contested by other leaders.

"For years we have been guided on who and how to vote," a party watcher said. "Now there is a chance to elect whom we want. So for the sake of the party and its survival, I think Umno members deserve to have the best selection of talent to choose from. If we can only choose No 2 but not No 1, what is the difference, where is the progress?"

**Ku Li meets top Pakatan leaders**

So far, only Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah has declared his interest to compete against Najib for the presidency. The 71-year old has been a sharp critic of an earlier plan to transfer power to Najib in 2010, a move that would have extended Abdullah's tenure by circumventing contest.

The Gua Musang MP also sent tremors around the Umno community this weekend by confirming rumours he had met top opposition leaders from the Pakatan Rakyat including Anwar Ibrahim, Abdul Hadi Awang and Lim Kit Siang, whom he described as 'old friends'.

"I am not looking for a job or power. I am offering leadership so the country can rise to the challenges of a globalised economy," said Razaleigh, also known by his short name of Ku Li.

Abdullah's controversial power pact has since been axed and party election are now due to

be held in March 2009. He has promised to decide by Oct 9 whether or not he will defend the Umno presidency. If he does not, it would clear the way for Najib to move up the ladder.

### **More candidates to show hand**

But whichever way Abdullah decides, party watchers expect a heated and crowded contest, with more candidates declaring their interest once he makes known his decision. Should he defend, he may find himself up against his own deputy and Ku Li at the very least. Should he give up the post, frontrunner Najib may still have to face other rivals apart from Ku Li for the No 1 job.

Like ex-premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad, vice-president Muhyiddin Yassin is not taking his boss for granted. Muhyiddin, respected for his courage in condemning the Abdullah-Najib 2010 power pact, is waiting for Abdullah to make his move before deciding which hat to throw into the ring.

umno retreat muhyiddin yassin pc 060608Although widely tipped to go for the deputy presidency, the 61-year-old International Trade and Industry Minister has been reserved about his target post - only saying his decision would depend on what his supporters believed best suited him.

"People are starting to realise there is now more time to campaign and among those who have expressed interest, some are proxies for Camp A or B or C. This is indicative of Abdullah still wanting to contest or wanting his people to contest and of Najib having his own preferences," Navaratnam said.

Najib's former political secretary Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and vice-president Mohd Ali Rustam have jumped the gun, booking slots in the No 2 race. Poised to join them may be former Selangor Chief Minister Muhammad Muhammad Taib, an Abdullah loyalist, vice-president Mohd Isa Abdul Samad and Foreign Minister Rais Yatim.

The latest, but perhaps not the last, to plumb for the deputy presidency is Nur Jazlan Mohamed, the chief of the Pulai division in Muhyiddin's home state of Johor. The outspoken Nur Jazlan raised eyebrows earlier this year by calling on Abdullah to quit after the Umno-led Barisan skidded to its worst performance, surrendering five of the country's 13 states to the Pakatan.

### **No 2 post overweight**

Unsurprisingly, the overweight candidacy for the No 2 post has sparked speculation that some of bigwigs gathered there might just be tasting the wind before gearing up for their true target - the party presidency.

"There is so much talent for the No 2 post, it is a real waste. Depending on how the jockeying goes, don't be surprised if they suddenly break ranks and file new formations. They can end up pairing off as No 1 and No 2, instead of all just zooming in for No 2," said the party insider.

However, party watchers also said that at this point in time Najib still looked a shoo-in to replace Abdullah and if his current pole position continued to look impregnable, it could

keep away rivals who might not want to wage a losing battle and risk offending his supporters.

The 55-year old Najib, who began his political career at age 22, has already begun courting support in resource-rich East Malaysia. At a gathering in Kota Kinabalu on Saturday, he called for change in the Barisan, "If we don't have the courage to change, then people will change us."

He also told the crowd the government might not implement the proposed Race Relations Act. "I used to describe Sabah as a fixed deposit for the BN. It appears that the fixed deposit is still intact, alhamdulillah. It is still in good condition and we will make it even better, insyaallah," Najib said.

### **Contests in other BN components**

Elsewhere in the Barisan, the MCA, the MIC and Gerakan have also been cranking up the rhetoric, bombarding the nation with a spate of public soul searching and new promises to stand up to Umno - which has been accused of repressing non-Malay rights.

mca party election president and deputy president post 2008Headed for party election on Oct 18, MCA leaders Ong Tee Keat and Chua Jui Meng are locked in a straight fight for the top post while the deputy presidency will be a three-cornered fight between Ong Ka Chuan, Donald Lim Siang Chai and Dr Chua Soi Lek.

Quietly, waiting in the wings is opposition icon Anwar Ibrahim. Political watchers expect his Pakatan to be on the alert for casualties falling off as the race inside the Barisan overheats.

Having already won over scores of junior leaders from Umno, MCA and Gerakan, the Pakatan may be gearing up for bigger fish ahead of Oct 13, which is when Parliament is due to resume.

"Anwar is keeping everybody guessing again. When Parliament reconvenes, chances are he will lead a vote of censure against the PM and keep up the pressure on the BN," Navaratnam said.

Apart from Ku Li confirming his meeting with Pakatan leaders, former law minister Zaid Ibrahim too caused a stir over the weekend - sparking speculation they might join the Pakatan.

In an interview with a Chinese daily, Zaid pulled no punches, calling not just for racial unity but also racial equality. "Take myself as an example. I'm a pure Malay, but I have a sense of security. I feel proud of my own race and culture," Zaid told Sin Chew Daily.

The Pakatan has pledged to topple the Barisan government soon through crossovers in Parliament, where it currently holds 82 out of 222 seats. It needs another 31 seats to overturn the Barisan's majority and is banking on government backbenchers to defect to its camp.