

Abdullah to decide within two days
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Umno president Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will decide within the next two days if he will defend his post in the party polls slated for next March.

This decision will be conveyed to the Barisan Nasional supreme council at its meeting on Wednesday, said Abdullah, who heads the ruling coalition.

"I will decide either tomorrow or Wednesday," he told a press conference in Kuala Lumpur after chairing a meeting with members of the International Advisory Panel to the Malaysian Biotechnology Corporation.

Political pundits are predicting that Abdullah will call it a day, paving the way for his deputy Najib Abdul Razak to take over the reins of Umno. By convention, the Umno president becomes the prime minister and head of the BN.

Speculation was further strengthened when several Umno leaders - including vice-president Mohd Ali Rustam, supreme council member Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and Pulai MP Nur Jazlan Mohamad - expressed their intention to fill the post currently occupied by Najib.

Abdullah, however, declined to either lend credence to such talk or dismiss it, other than to confirm that his decision and other matters pertaining to Umno's leadership plans would be conveyed to the BN leaders on Wednesday.

barisan nasional "I am hoping to have that meeting because our colleagues in Barisan Nasional have already indicated that they would like to be briefed on what we are doing and what the plans are going to be," he said.

"They have said that the president of Umno is going to be the chair(person) of Barisan Nasional, so they would like to have information as to what exactly is going to happen. They are interested in who that is going to be."

Asked whether those who announced they were contesting the Umno No 2 post had jumped the gun as he had yet to declare his plan, Abdullah said: "That is their choice, whether they want to announce early or they want to wait. That is entirely up to them."

"You wait. After a while, some of them will drop out, and then you will be left with only two, perhaps only one."

Pressed to give a clearer indication of his intention, Abdullah said he would announce it "soon".

"I'm not intending to announce it now, right? No need, lah. You wait. After all, two, three, four days is not too long, right?"

Mixed signals received

He sent out mixed signals, though, when he said he wants to fulfill his promises to the

electorate pertaining to improved anti-corruption efforts and judicial reform.

"There is some work that I have to undertake. The reforms that I promised to the rakyat, I will undertake of course. I will still do it," he said.

In reference to former de facto law minister Zaid Ibrahim (left) who had complained of going up against a brick wall in seeking to carry through judicial reforms, Abdullah said his resignation from the cabinet did not mean an end to the government's plans for improvements in that area.

"I know that Zaid Ibrahim is not with us any more. That does not mean everything has to stop. It's not his idea, anyway, it was mine. It was in the 2004 (election) manifesto, remember? I must make good my promises. I must deliver," he added.

Abdullah has faced widespread criticism for the slow pace of reforms. It was among factors that led to a drastic drop in support for the BN in the March general election.

In the post-election period, Umno leaders and members exerted tremendous pressure on him to step down.

In recent weeks, Abdullah has seen through a transition pact with Najib (right in photo) to bring forward his date of departure from June 2010, including a portfolio swap.

Umno polls were then moved from Dec 19 to next March, but it has not appeased detractors from pressing for his earlier exit.

Previously, Abdullah had said he would announce his decision on defending his post before Thursday, when Umno divisional meetings are scheduled to start.

Candidates must obtain a specific number of nominations from divisions before they can contest top posts (see Chart).

While some second-line leaders have rushed to stake their claim on the deputy presidency, information chief Muhammad Taib, an Abdullah loyalist, vice-presidents Muhyiddin Yassin and Mohd Isa Abdul Samad and Foreign Affairs Minister Rais Yatim are expected to make their moves only after Abdullah's announcement.

The race for the No 1 post is also expected to heat up. So far, only Gua Musang MP Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah has declared his interest to contest the post.