

PM expected to announce departure date
Malaysiakini.com
Oct 8, 2008

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is expected today to announce when he will step down, ending months of uncertainty since the disastrous March general election.

Abdullah has been under intense pressure to quit since the polls which saw the opposition claim a third of parliamentary seats and five states in its best-ever performance, plunging the ruling coalition into disarray.

"The prime minister is expected to make a big announcement this afternoon. He has already met with the cabinet this morning," his spokesperson Kamal Khalid told reporters.

Kamal said Abdullah would meet with leaders of the Barisan Nasional coalition at 3.30pm before addressing the media.

It is learnt that Abdullah did not reveal his decision to his ministers at the cabinet meeting earlier today.

Abdullah originally wanted to hand over to his deputy Najib Abdul Razak in mid-2010 but was forced to review his departure date as he lost support from the ruling coalition's grassroots.

Avert humiliating challenge

To avert a humiliating challenge at the party's leadership elections in December, he shifted the vote to March and said he would consider whether to seek re-election as party president.

Traditionally the Umno president - who leads a multi-racial coalition and has dominated Malaysian politics for half a century - becomes the prime minister.

Abdullah is also facing a campaign by Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim to seize power with the help of defecting lawmakers.

Anwar said he has the numbers to form a new administration but is being blocked from triggering a change in government - which would be the first in Malaysia's history.

Abdullah came to power in 2003 and was initially buoyed by a groundswell of support for his promises of reform after two decades of hardline rule under veteran premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

However, he was quickly seen as weak and ineffective after failing to come to grips with corruption, high crime rate and inefficient bureaucracy which he had vowed to address.

The political vacuum since the March polls has paralysed foreign investment and suppressed trade on the stock exchange, in a malaise which is now being worsened by the global economic crisis.

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