

PM not contesting, to quit in March
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Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has decided not to defend his Umno president's post and will quit in March next year when the ruling party meets for its annual general assembly.

The embattled premier announced this today to a packed press conference after chairing a 90-minute BN special supreme council meeting.

bn supreme council abdullah announcement 081008 03He added that his decision not to contest in the Umno polls was not to create a rift in the party.

"I am announcing I will not seek the presidency of Umno in the upcoming elections. I do not want a divided party and governing coalition, but one that is united and harmonious," Abdullah, 68, told a packed press conference, referring to the party's internal leadership vote in March.

Under the power transition plan agreed between Abdullah and his deputy, Najib Abdul Razak, 55, the deputy premier will take over as soon as Abdullah steps down.

"At some point I will have to hand over to my successor," he added.

He said that he hoped the person who will take over from him would be Najib.

"I hope it is Najib. Why do I say hope? Najib has to stand for Umno elections first. Once he wins the elections and becomes party president then we will discuss it (the transition)," he said.

"It is not the time for us to indulge in infighting or engage in narrow politics, it is now time for us to strengthen our unity and cooperate among ourselves and place the interests of the country above all."

Abdullah also said that he would want to implement his promises in reforming the judiciary and to give more bite to the Anti-Corruption Agency to fight graft before he leaves.

He added that Najib had agreed to back these initiatives.

Najib did not comment on the matter today, saying that he would hold a press conference tomorrow.

Cleaning up the judiciary, police force

In pursuing these reforms, Abdullah said that he will be tabling two key bills in the Parliament before the end of his term - the Judicial Appointments Commission and the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission.

The outgoing premier also vowed to push through the controversial Special Complaints Commission, which has been stalled in Parliament.

bn supreme council abdullah announcement 081008 01Abdullah had spoken much about these reforms in the past but to date no concrete action has been taken to get them moving.

"These initiatives are important because they are necessary to move our country forward. These initiatives are needed to regain our country's competitiveness. They are necessary to enable our nation and our society to face the challenges that the world has in store for us."

Earlier a component party leader told Malaysiakini that after Abdullah's announcement, the BN leaders took turns to thank him for his leadership over the past five years.

While Abdullah was briefing BN leaders on the power transfer plan at the meeting, scores of his supporters had gathered outside the PWTC building to urge him to stay on.

Armed with banners, the supporters called on the embattled premier to continue until 2010 amid the now confirmed speculation that he might be forced to step down earlier.

Seen as weak and ineffective

Should Abdullah resign as prime minister in March 2009, he would be one of the most shortest-serving prime ministers - his term lasted five years five months.

The country's second prime minister, Abdul Razak Hussein, who died in office in 1976, served for five years four months.

Meanwhile, third prime minister Hussein Onn, who resigned in 1981 to make way for Dr Mahathir Mohamad ostensibly due to health concerns, served for five years six months.

bn supreme council abdullah announcement 081008 02Mahathir went on to serve for 22 years - the country's longest. Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, on the other hand, was at the helm for 14 years.

Nevertheless, it is possible that Abdullah may continue to serve as premier for a few more months despite no longer being Umno president.

Abdullah, who took power on Oct 31, 2003 from Mahathir, won a landslide victory in the March 2004 general election only to suffer an unprecedented defeat exactly four years later.

He was initially buoyed by a groundswell of support for his promises of reform after two decades of hardline rule under Mahathir - the country's longest serving leader.

However, he was quickly seen as weak and ineffective after failing to come to grips with endemic corruption, high crime rates and inefficient bureaucracy, issues which he had vowed to address in his 2004 election manifesto.

Ali Rustam: Resignation will unite party

Umno vice-president Mohamad Ali Rustam, a possible contender for the newly vacated deputy premier's post, said Abdullah's announcement would revitalise the party which has been in disarray since the elections.

"This will unite Umno and Barisan Nasional so that we can win the next election. I hope all Umno members will support Najib," he said. "Najib has to regain public confidence for the Barisan Nasional."

BN's coalition partners representing ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities were almost wiped out in the elections.

"Barisan Nasional's challenge is to see how it can concretely carry out reforms. BN needs rebranding. It has to change its attitude and approach," said Dr Koh Tsu Koon, chief of the predominantly Chinese Gerakan.

"The next general election is not going to be easy unless we really, really reform," he added.

Political observers said Najib faced a massive task to revitalise the government which is seen as out of touch and riddled with corruption and cronyism.

"He certainly will want to portray himself as a reformer, he will need to do that in order to survive, but voter patience is a lot thinner now than a few years ago," said Ibrahim Suffian from the Merdeka Centre research firm.

"With the advent of a new leader they might salvage some sort of hope and credibility," he said.

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