

**Intrigue at Umno to topple Abdullah**  
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Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is also outgoing president of Umno, should not read the latest calls to hasten party election by three months as a move to oust him from office earlier than his stated retirement deadline of March 2009.

Party watchers told Malaysiakini that Abdullah could stay on as premier even if party polls were carried out in December.

They said the growing calls from Umno leaders - including from vice president Muhyiddin Yassin - to bring forward the party election was to shorten the campaigning period, not to get rid of the embattled premier.

"There is nothing wrong with shifting the election back to December. The Umno presidency and the premiership are two different things. No doubt one follows the other, but the timing does not have to be exactly synchronised. It can be adjusted," a party watcher said.

Yet the 68-year old Abdullah himself does not rule out any ulterior possibilities. In a rare outburst, he pointed the finger at former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad for causing disunity in the party.

"(Mahathir) is behaving like the director for the party elections, determining so and so should hold such a position. What right has he to do this? Who is he to make such decisions? This will create hatred among Umno members, teaching Umno members to quarrel among themselves," Abdullah told reporters yesterday.

"The point is that there is an agreement. Why want to raise it again? Can't wait to become deputy president. That is if there is enough support for him," the normally cool Abdullah shot back at Muhyiddin, who is contesting the No 2 post.

Although Muhyiddin has denied he was trying to hasten Abdullah's exit, conspiracy theories abound about the premier's imminent overthrow by foes from within the intrigue-laden Umno, the backbone of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

"Muhyiddin's call is deliberately timed so that it could be endorsed by the Umno divisions holding their meetings this weekend as to create a 'popular' momentum which could justify a further Umno supreme council modification of the power transition plan," said opposition stalwart Lim Kit Siang.

"The question that is uppermost in many minds is whether Mahathir is now back in the saddle, although he has quit Umno, and is orchestrating Abdullah's earlier exit in December?," Lim said.

The 82-year old Mahathir has been among the most insistent on Abdullah's stepping down in favour of his deputy Najib Abdul Razak.

Although hand-picked to be his successor in 2003, Mahathir now blames Abdullah for Umno and the BN's worst electoral performance at national polls held earlier this year, where the Pakatan Rakyat alliance won five of the country's 13 states.

## **Helping Najib to tighten his grip on power**

Despite denials he was playing puppet master, the outspoken Mahathir has rushed out to defend his protege, who was hit by a double-whammy of scandals last week. That set off talk that the latest attempt to fast-track party election was to prevent Abdullah and his supporters from exploiting the situation.

"There are those who worry there could be even more scandals in the offing. They want Najib to consolidate his position or things could become unstuck if grassroots start having second thoughts about him and whether he is fit to be party leader," said another Umno observer.

Allegations that the 55-year old Najib had an affair with a controversially murdered Mongolian woman resurfaced after website Malaysia Today posted a series of SMS messages purportedly sent by him to a senior lawyer involved in the case.

The deputy premier has denied ever knowing the 28-year Altantuya Shariibuu.

He has also come under scrutiny over a questionable, high-cost helicopter deal sanctioned during his time in the defence ministry. Abdullah, who last month swapped his finance portfolio with Najib's defence post, has promised to investigate the matter.

Meanwhile, Mahathir blamed political rivals for 'demonising' Najib.

"I faced all that before. I was labelled many things and was accused of everything. They even set up a Royal Commission to find my faults but nothing has been proven so far," Mahathir told a local daily yesterday.

Although well-respected for modernising Malaysia, the feisty Mahathir has also attracted rebuke both domestically and internationally.

Among other things, he has been accused of maiming the judiciary's independence, gagging the media and using the oppressive Internal Security Act to jail political opponents without trial during his 22-years in power.

## **Abdullah likely to stay on as PM till March**

By convention, the Umno president becomes the chairman of the BN coalition and therefore the country's premier.

Party watchers told Malaysiakini the gap of three months until Najib took over as premier was acceptable and could be endorsed by both BN and Umno members. Najib is widely tipped to win the president's post unchallenged.

"Abdullah has already give his absolute decision to step down in March. He wants additional time to complete his programs. So this should be acceptable to the incoming Umno president, who in any case, will be holding the real power even if not the actual office of prime minister itself," the party observer said.

Bowing to pressure to quit, Abdullah earlier this month agreed not to defend the Umno

presidency. He also announced he would quit as prime minister by March 2009. The supreme council duly postponed the party's annual congress cum election, initially slated for December, to coincide with the new retirement time-line.

However, party leaders - especially those nominated to stand for office - believe the extra three months unnecessarily prolonged campaigning, making it difficult to sustain their supporters' interest.

Nominations, which began on Oct 9, are due to end on Nov 9. After that, successful nominees can begin canvassing for support.

If party election is held in December, then campaigning would last for about a month, which is the traditionally given period. But if election is in March 2009, campaigning would have to be stretched over a four month period.

"There can be the issue of money politics and will drain resources like energy and funds. All this because we want to accommodate the so-called power transition plan," Muhyiddin had decried.

"It is hard to read the undercurrents," political analyst Khoo Kay Peng told Malaysiakini. "But Abdullah has already agreed to step down. In fact, he has brought forward the so-called power transition twice, from 2010 to 2009. So if there is another round of pressure to make it December 2008, I think it will set off a big fight-back from some segments of the party."

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