

PM to meet king on April 2
Malaysiakini.com
Mar 28, 09

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will meet the Agong next Thursday to inform him of his intention to quit as prime minister and hand over the country's top post to Najib Abdul Razak.

The outgoing PM made the announcement in his closing remarks as former Umno president to the party's general assembly this afternoon.

"I will have an audience with the king on April 2 to inform His Majesty that I will relinquish my responsibility as the prime minister," Abdullah told party delegates at the end of the annual meeting.

"If His Majesty grants the consent, a date will be fixed for the official (swearing-in) ceremony," he said.

This announcement is expected to put to rest speculations that Abdullah will make a drastic decision not to step down as prime minister despite quitting Umno's top post.

It is widely expected that Najib will be sworn in as the new prime minister the day after Abdullah had an audience with Agong Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin.

'I forgive you, Muhyiddin'

Today marks the end of the Abdullah era in Umno, a 5-year period described by many observers as a wobbly and crisis-ridden era helmed by a 'nice but weak' leader.

In his final speech as party president, Abdullah appeared emotional as he thanked Umno members and delegates for ensuring that the party's 59th annual general assembly was carried out smoothly.

Sometimes, he was also teary. His tone was solemn and the usually spirited leader was also caught stuttering a few times.

Already known as a leader with the 'kampung' or grassroots style of speech appeal - subtle and slow and an oratory style often mistaken as lacking in charisma - this time Abdullah was even more reticent.

But what was lacking was compensated with persistence and perseverance, the perseverance to carry on and finish his speech despite being in an apparent emotional state.

Abdullah was also forgiving today and he showed that human side of him.

"I want to retire with an open heart and not have any hard feelings," he said in an address that ended with a standing ovation.

In his usual 'cultured' approach, he declared that he had forgiven Muhyiddin Yassin for his role in hastening his (Abdullah's) exit as prime minister.

Muhyiddin has earlier conceded that he had wronged Abdullah and had sought his forgiveness.

Abdullah smilingly replied, "I have never been angry with you Muhyiddin. Brother, I forgive you."

The atmosphere was that of melancholy at this point with delegates applauding Abdullah's warm gesture. Abdullah received the applause with a hearty smile.

Party must unite behind leaders

In his speech, Abdullah expressed his confidence in the new line-up saying that they can definitely restore the faith of the people in Umno as the ruling party.

"I believe the new leadership can bring the changes and strengthen the party to ensure that this party remains the choice of the people," he said.

And like other past leaders, Abdullah gave his last advice to party members as the sixth party president.

"My advice to the members is to preserve unity and enliven the spirit of Umno in yourselves.

"We must continue to be loyal supporters. We must not just become supporters, we must also become friends.

"Don't ever betray the party, do not spread lies about the party. We are always watched by the people and they will continue to support us if we remain close to them," were his last words.

Abdullah, in his opening speech on Friday, delivered a blistering assessment of the party, saying it was in decay and that it had become contaminated by greed, complacency and internal rivalries.

Najib now faces a critical first test with three by-elections on April 7 seen as a barometer of the government's support since the 2008 elections, when the opposition won a third of seats in parliament and five of the 13 states.

Opposition has the edge

Ibrahim Suffian from the Merdeka Centre, an independent polling organisation, said the opposition had a good chance of winning two of the votes, including one for a seat in Parliament.

"Losses will put Najib under some pressure because there's a lot of hope in him to fix the party and turn around the electoral fortunes," he told AFP.

"So if they don't win then he has to really think of different ways to regain voter confidence."

Abdullah's nemesis, his predecessor Dr Mahathir Mohamad who helped hound him out of office, said today he will now rejoin Umno which he quit last year in protest over Abdullah's leadership.

Mahathir, who spent more than two decades in power, hand-picked Abdullah to replace him in 2003 but was enraged by the new leader's decision to dismantle several of his pet projects.

"I will rejoin Umno. When - I will tell you later," Mahathir told reporters during a surprise visit to the closing session of the party's five-day annual congress.

The veteran politician had snubbed the meeting this week, after his son Mukhriz Mahathir failed in his bid to become Youth wing chief - an influential post won instead by Abdullah's son-in-law.