

Najib likely to reshuffle Cabinet, push polls back
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KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 1 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak is likely to reshuffle his Cabinet as early as this month and delay calling elections to later this year as scandals engulfing at least two ministers are threatening the feel-good factor of Budget 2012 where the prime minister dispensed direct cash aid to some 5.3 million households, Umno insiders say.

The Malaysian Insider understands that Prime Minister's Office (PMO) senior officials have a list of potential new ministers and deputy ministers that will be seen as Najib's (picture) people to execute his New Economic Model (NEM) and political transformation programme as he heads into the general election.

"Najib needs more of his own men in the Cabinet. And he needs to replace those seen as tainted before he calls an election," said an Umno lawmaker close to the party president, referring to scandals surrounding Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, religious affairs minister Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom and deputy minister Datuk Awang Adek Hussin who admitted to receiving some financial contributions.

There has been speculation in the Chinese media and also among political analysts that Najib could dissolve parliament after the Chinese New Year celebrations on January 23 for a March election, four years after Election 2008.

It is understood that the Election Commission (EC) has booked school halls and community centres for a possible election in March. However, others say Najib is waiting for electoral reforms and the initial public offering by state land developer Felda before calling an election.

Another Umno source said the party is also not ready for polls despite Najib telling party members to be on a "war footing" for an early election. "We are not exactly ready. Some warlords don't want to give up their chance of standing in the next polls," he told The Malaysian Insider.

The source pointed out only former Terengganu menteri besar and Umno chief, Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh, has openly said he will not contest in future elections.

"Most warlords think they can win if they are picked. And if they are not picked, they will refuse to work for those named just like what happened in 2008," he added.

Umno won only 79 of the 112 federal seats it contested in 2008 when the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) lost its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority and four more state governments. Former party president and prime minister Tun Abdullah Badawi stepped down a year after the losses and handed the leadership to Najib.

Party officials and analysts say the popular Najib must regain the two-thirds parliamentary majority or at least match Abdullah's victory margin. "It isn't easy and the current scandals don't help Najib who is essentially a cautious man," one party official told The Malaysian Insider.

Several Umno warlords have openly asked Shahrizat to resign from her political posts over investigations into her family's company, the National Feedlot Corporation (NFC), which the Auditor-General said was in a financial "mess" after getting RM250 million in public fund.

The Women, Family and Community Development minister has said the company has nothing to do with her and Najib and his deputy, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, have denied that she has sent a resignation letter. But a new probe by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) has sparked speculation that Shahrizat will have to go rather than have the scandal smear Umno.

Umno is already on the backfoot after former Selangor menteri besar Dr Khir Toyo was convicted of graft and sentenced to a year's jail last month in a land purchase deal. He is appealing the case.

Jamil, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department for Islamic Affairs, has denied he and two religious officials had misappropriated alms money to pay their legal fees in a case brought by opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

An audit report said RM63,650 from the council's zakat fund to settle their legal costs incurred when Anwar named the trio as respondents in his qazaf application. It also confirmed that the sum was repaid to the fund after the council obtained a RM70,000 grant in June last year as part of its general resources allocation from the government.

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