

No Cabinet reshuffle, but polls later, say sources
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By Jahabar Sadiq

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 12 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak has decided to keep his Cabinet despite scandals engulfing at least two ministers, but will decide on calling elections only after gauging support resulting from the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim sodomy verdict and Putrajaya's direct cash aid to some 5.3 million households, say sources.

The Malaysian Insider understands the prime minister has shelved a list of potential new Cabinet members and deputy ministers presented by officials from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) after he returned from vacation on January 3.

"Najib has decided to keep the Cabinet as it is as all of them are in the clear," said an Umno lawmaker close to the party president.

He pointed out that Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil is not part of the scandal-hit National Feedlot Centre (NFC) project run by her family while the Kuala Lumpur mufti has cleared religious affairs minister Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom of any impropriety in using zakat funds for a legal case.

Finance deputy minister Datuk Awang Adek Hussin, who admitted to receiving some financial contributions using a personal account, has also been cleared after giving an explanation to Najib, the Umno lawmaker added.

"They are in the clear, so there's no need to reshuffle," he said.

A Putrajaya insider confirmed to The Malaysian Insider that the reshuffle has been called off while the prime minister weighs his options in dissolving the Parliament ahead of his mandate expiring in March 2013.

"He has more than a year left of the mandate. So Najib can take his time as he wants to ensure a resounding victory," he added.

There has been speculation that Najib would call for a general election soon as his popularity remains high and there is a positive buzz from the Kuala Lumpur High Court's decision on Monday to acquit Anwar of a sodomy charge, the second in 14 years.

Analysts have said that the prime minister should call for a snap poll so as to take advantage of the feel-good factor of the verdict and people's happiness in receiving a RM500 direct cash aid while opposition leaders are confident Najib will delay the election in order to build up support.

"Najib is cautious. He is assessing the situation and is not in a rush," said another Umno official.

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.

The Malaysian Insider reported on January 1 that Umno sources say the party was 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," a source had told The Malaysian Insider.

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, while both 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 allow the scandal to 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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