

BN still weak because of Pak Lah, Dr M tells Johor Umno
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KUALA LUMPUR, June 2 — The Barisan Nasional (BN) government is still weak because of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's tenure as prime minister, his predecessor and vocal critic Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad told several Johor Umno division chiefs two days ago.

The Malaysian Insider understands the influential Dr Mahathir (picture) met Johor civil servants and Johor Umno division chiefs where he was briefed about the state's political situation and BN's preparedness for the next general elections. Johor is the birthplace of the original Umno which was declared illegal in 1988 when Dr Mahathir was president, and remains its strongest political fortress until today.

"Dr Mahathir told the Umno chiefs they have to work very hard because the government is still weak due to Pak Lah's time as PM," a source told The Malaysian Insider, referring to Abdullah's moniker.

"He still believes Abdullah is the cause of BN's weaknesses," the source stressed.

This is Dr Mahathir's second meeting with Umno divisional leaders in as many weeks, with the first being a briefing with Kedah Umno on May 20. There, he called for party unity ahead of the coming polls in the PAS-ruled state.

Abdullah became the shortest-serving prime minister after BN lost its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority and four states in Election 2008. He stepped down in April 2009 in favour of Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

Dr Mahathir, the country's longest-serving prime minister, quit Umno in May 2008 to protest Abdullah's leadership and failure in March 2008 general election. Pak Lah succeeded Dr Mahathir in 2003 and won 91 per cent of the parliament's elected house, Dewan Rakyat, in the 2004 polls.

It is learnt that Abdullah is due to release his memoirs soon where he has written about the tiff with Dr Mahathir that led to his downfall despite enjoying a 71 per cent approval rating before Election 2008. Many have blamed the results to poor intelligence and public anger stirred by the Hindraf and Bersih rallies in November 2007.

Pak Lah's successor, Najib, has been working hard to regain support for BN since April 2009 by launching a slew of economic, administrative and political reforms. He has also initiated programmes to help poor households tide with rising cost of living by giving RM500 each to 5.3 million households early this year.

But Najib's popularity has slipped in recent months, an opinion poll showed yesterday, as he lost support among Chinese and middle-class voters ahead of a general election that he could call within months.

Support for Najib slid to 65 per cent in the May poll from 69 per cent in March, according to pollster Merdeka Centre.

The 58-year-old leader has enjoyed high personal approval ratings, but analysts say it is

unclear whether that will translate into increased support for his less popular Umno party and its allies. The dip may add to speculation that Najib may choose to delay elections until after presenting the budget on September 28.

"The small gain in Malay voter satisfaction towards the PM appears to have been outweighed by the large negative swing among Chinese voters," Merdeka Center said in a statement.

The poll found that approval for Najib was weakest among the Chinese, tumbling 19 percentage points to 37 per cent. Among those in the middle income bracket, this fell 18 percentage points to 50 per cent. His popularity among Malays, who form the majority of Malaysia's population, rose 5 percentage points to 79 per cent.

Voters' views on the government remained lukewarm, with approval staying unchanged at 48 per cent. The survey was carried out between May 10 and May 18 among 1,019 registered voters to gauge sentiment after an anti-government protest in April.

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