

Polls delay worsening MBs' race, say BN sources
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KUALA LUMPUR, July 5 — The delay in calling polls is intensifying the race for state mentris besar and chief ministers among Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders who believe Datuk Seri Najib Razak will make changes to ensure his transformation programmes are carried out at all levels by trusted lieutenants, say sources within the ruling federal coalition.

Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam has already said he was willing to move to Putrajaya after helming the tiny state since 1999.

The Malaysian Insider had reported in May that only Negri Sembilan Mentri Besar Datuk Seri Mohamad Hassan and his Perlis counterpart, Datuk Seri Md Isa Sabu, are among the few assured of continuing in their posts if BN retains both states.

"The race is getting wider as long as elections are not called. More people are eyeing the posts and lobbying to be given a chance," a BN leader told The Malaysian Insider.

It is learnt that Najib, who is BN chairman and Umno president, has met with a number of Umno leaders seen as capable of succeeding those who have led the states since Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's tenure as PM, which ended in 2003.

Apart from Mohd Ali, other long-serving mentris besar are Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, who has been helming Johor since 1995, and Pahang's Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob, who took office in 1999.

The longest-serving chief minister is Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, who led BN to victory in the Sarawak election last year in what is seen as his last term since assuming office in 1981, the same year Dr Mahathir came to power.

BN sources say Tangga Batu MP Datuk Idris Haron is the leading candidate to replace Mohd Ali as the state chief executive. A close associate of the Malacca chief minister, Idris is now chairman of Syarikat Perumahan Negara Bhd (SPNB), the government agency that revives abandoned housing projects apart from handling low-cost housing programmes.

Idris also had a short-lived career as a deputy minister in Tun Abdullah Badawi's administration after Election 2008 but was dropped by Najib who took over in April 2009.

The other two candidates in the running to be Malacca chief minister are Masjid Tanah MP Datuk Wira Abu Seman and state exco member Datuk Ghafar Atan. All three are Umno division leaders, said a source.

In Perak, Mentri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abd Kadir is tipped to join the federal Cabinet after the next general election, switching with Second Finance Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Husni Hanadzlah, another BN source said.

"Perak has a lot of warlords eyeing the top state post. A switch is seen as beneficial," added the source, explaining that there are a few who think they can do a better job than Zambry. The Pangkor assemblyman was a surprise choice as MB after BN took over the state in

February 2009, when three Pakatan Rakyat (PR) lawmakers walked out of the ruling coalition.

Pahang is tipped to have Lanchang assemblyman and state Umno No. 2 Datuk Mohd Sharkar Shamsuddin replace Adnan, whose experience is said to be useful in Putrajaya.

In Kedah, there is mounting speculation that International Trade and Industry Deputy Minister Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir could be the next MB if BN regains the state that PR won in 2008. The Jerlun MP is also the Kedah Umno deputy chief but holds no elected post in the state chapter.

BN sources say the race for the top post in Johor, Selangor and Terengganu is also getting crowded as long as polls are delayed. Najib has to call for an election by next April although there was speculation of polls this month or after Budget 2013 is tabled on September 28.

The frontrunner for Selangor is state Umno deputy chief Datuk Seri Noh Omar, but the source said several corporate figures have also been included in the list sent to Najib, who is also the state party chief.

"There are new names every other week but Najib is careful and meticulous, he will take his time to decide," he said.

Sources had told The Malaysian Insider in May that BN will also take into consideration the views of the various state Rulers before nominating anyone for the top state post.

"It must be someone agreeable to the respective state Ruler, otherwise there will be chaos," one source said, pointing out to last-minute changes in Perlis and Terengganu after Election 2008.

After the March 8, 2008 general election, then BN chief and Prime Minister Abdullah had nominated Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim to continue as Perlis MB but Md Isa was sworn by the Raja of Perlis as the latter claimed support of eight fellow Umno assemblymen in the 15-seat state assembly.

In Terengganu, the state Ruler rejected Abdullah's nominee, Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh, to continue as MB and instead swore in Datuk Seri Ahmad Said despite overwhelming protest from the state Umno and the temporary sacking of the new MB from the party. The issue was later resolved when Abdullah agreed to the Ruler's choice.

Najib, who is going through the candidates lists, has said that he will make the final decision on candidates and even seat allocation in the 13-member coalition.

Although he has been in government for more than 30 years, this will be Najib's first time leading the coalition into an election and to win a personal mandate. Analysts agree that Najib will win the next general election, with only the margin of victory in question.

The next general election will see an additional 2.2 million voters to 12 million registered to cast their ballots.

The Election Commission (EC) has also accepted recommendations for indelible ink and a minimum 10-day campaign period in the next election following protests for a clean and fair election.

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