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UMNO DIVISIONAL MEETINGS

Allow Abdullah to finish reforms

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WILL Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin succeed in his attempt to get the Umno supreme council to further hasten the party's transition of power, bringing it forward from March next year to December this year?

That's the question on the minds of many Umno members following Muhyiddin's comments last week that the campaigning period was too long and that it would "affect the official work of ministers and deputy ministers aspiring for posts in the party".

Muhyiddin's comments were met with a stern rebuttal from fellow cabinet colleague and fellow Johorean Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad who said those who found it a hindrance should take leave and focus on campaigning.

But there are those who feel Muhyiddin and his supporters may try to get a feel of the mood and try again at the supreme council meeting on Oct 31 after party president, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, returns from China.

Another cabinet member and Johor leader, Umno vice-president hopeful Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, also ticked off Muhyiddin and party leaders asking for the party elections to be brought forward.

"It is because of the special circumstances — the transition of power — which was why it was deferred," he



was reported as saying.

Syed Hamid also said that Muhyiddin should not have complained that the five-month campaign period was too taxing for those holding government posts.

"My priority has always been, if you cannot balance (your work), then you have to opt out of one or the other."

Even Abdullah, who has said that he will retire in March after getting crucial judicial reforms and anti-corruption measures passed through Parliament, questioned Muhyiddin's motives: why was the international trade and industry minister so impatient in wanting to become deputy prime minister?

The soft-spoken Abdullah, who hardly ever criticises his colleagues and party members in public, was visibly upset when he questioned whether Muhyiddin did not want the reforms in the judiciary and giving more powers to the anti-corruption agency to go through.

Muhyiddin has since backtracked, saying he was not seeking to shorten

the transition period, merely the party elections. But Abdullah's supporters and political observers say that bringing the elections forward and shortening the transition period are one and the same.

"If Abdullah steps down as party president in December, then he has no locus standi to remain as prime minister," says Mohamed Tawfik Ismail, a former Umno member of parliament and the eldest son of one of Malaysia's founding fathers, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman.

Tawfik says reforms need to be carried out as the larger audience outside Umno wants them.

"Umno leaders cannot think of Umno in isolation. I don't think Muhyiddin has the grasp on how the public will perceive BN if there are no reforms," he says.

If the reason for pushing for early party elections is just to stop reforms from being implemented, it will give Pakatan Rakyat added ammunition, adds Tawfik.

Abdullah's supporters say that the prime minister is firm in wanting to complete the reforms and had already gracefully agreed to step down to prevent any contest in the party that might cause a split.

This was the essence of the 2010 formula, which obviously was not to the satisfaction of some Umno leaders like Muhyiddin who has been at

the forefront to get Abdullah to resign after the March general election.

Abdullah's detractors succeeded in pushing for an even earlier handover, leading to the March 2009 agreement whereby Abdullah would step down as prime minister after the party assembly.

This was widely accepted by members of the party's supreme council, including Abdullah's chosen successor, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, to give Abdullah some time to finish his promised reforms.

Now it seems that even this agreement is under question as detractors claim that the deal had caused unhappiness at the grassroots, thus bringing renewed calls to revert to the original date of the party elections.

As another confrontation looms over the transition, party watchers read this as Muhyiddin wanting to oust Abdullah earlier.

He has been described as a man in a hurry to be No 2, as deputy president and subsequently deputy prime minister. Some said he and his supporters believed earlier elections would allow them to capitalise on their current popularity.

An election in March, however, would give laggards a fighting chance and diminish the chances of those who had received a high number of nominations from the divi-

sions; sentiment can turn against those who have taken an early lead.

Also, some believe that funds would dry up if campaigning went on for too long. Money politics has long been associated with Umno elections; the leaders themselves admit this.

There is, of course, nothing to fear if all candidates contest on their merits and stay away from money politics. The disciplinary board, which party veteran Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen Tengku Ismail chairs, expressed fears yesterday that the long campaigning period would breed money politics.

Stories of money exchanging hands, of contenders for top positions being financed by rich businessmen in return for favours are not only damaging to Umno but also to the government. The Umno president is, by Barisan Nasional convention, the prime minister, his deputy the deputy premier while senior party officials hold cabinet portfolios.

Abdullah has been gracious enough to agree to pass the baton to Najib in March; the least Umno leaders like Muhyiddin can do for him is to allow him to finish his reforms by tabling the three bills — on the Judicial Appointments Commission, Prevention of Corruption Commission and Special Complaints Commission, all of which are aimed at improving transparency and good governance.