

DATE: 27/9/2008

Abdullah to step down earlier than planned

■ By V. Vasudevan, Sajahan Waheed and Jennifer Gomez

news@nst.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR: Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will step down as prime minister much earlier than the planned date of June 2010, possibly by March next year.

At an emergency Umno supreme council meeting, Abdullah declined to expressly state when he would vacate the prime minister's position.

But he said the transition plan that he had outlined in July — where he would hand over power to his deputy Datuk Seri Najib Razak in June 2010 — was “no longer in place”.

Under the plan, Abdullah and Najib would have defended their positions as president and deputy president of Umno at the party polls in December.

The prime minister's post comes with the post of Umno president, the party being the largest in the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

Yesterday, however, Abdullah said the party's annual general assembly and polls had been postponed to March and he would decide by Oct 9 — when the 191 Umno divisions start nominating leaders for party posts — whether he would defend his position.

He had not made a decision yet but “I intend to do it before the divisional meetings”, Abdullah told a packed news conference after chairing the hour-long special Umno supreme council meeting.

Abdullah declined to be drawn into answering questions on his decision to contest, saying: “It will be my decision whether to contest

“
When my work is finished, I will leave. Maybe there are two or three people who feel that way (that he should leave) but there is no pressure.”

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

or not. You can go on guessing. But it is my decision.”

Although the transition plan had been agreed upon by the Umno supreme council, several of its members, led by International Trade and Industry Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, later changed their minds after Umno's defeat at the Permatang Pauh by-election and sought an earlier departure for the prime minister.

The others were Wanita chief Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz, Umno Youth chief Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein and Datuk Shafie Apdal.

But other members were supportive of the plan and in the last few days, Penang and Kelantan Umno and a large number of Malay-based non-governmental organisations asked that the origi-

nal transition plan be adhered to.

Abdullah yesterday dismissed the perception that he was being pressured into leaving.

“That has nothing to do with it. When my work is finished, I will leave. Maybe there are two or three people who feel that way (that he should leave) but there is no pressure.”

“Najib and I have a good understanding. There is no problem.”

But Abdullah made some pointed remarks which those present took as aimed at two other harsh critics of his — former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Gua Musang member of parliament Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

When asked whether he would take leave from the party and government, Abdullah replied that in all his life in public service and politics, he had never run away from responsibility or abandoned Umno.

“I love the party and even in difficult times I have remained with it. I have never left Umno. I never joined Semangat 46. I have never joined any opposition party.”

“I have never stood on any opposition platform for the sake of my personal interest and attacked Umno. There is no record of me ever attacking the party.”

Tengku Razaleigh formed Semangat 46 after he lost the fight for Umno president against Dr Mahathir in 1987 and continued to oppose Umno and Barisan Nasional for almost a decade until he disbanded the party and rejoined Umno in 1997.

Dr Mahathir campaigned against Umno on a Pas platform in the 1970s when he was expelled from Umno by the late Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Dr Mahathir also started attack-

ing BN shortly after he left office in 2003 and in July this year, he quit the party together with his son Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir. He continued to attack Abdullah and Najib and those who did not agree with his views.

Asked whether the deferment of the party assembly would affect the divisional meetings starting in the second week of October, Abdullah said the divisional elections would take place as scheduled.

“The divisional meetings have to proceed as planned. Usually the general assembly is held a month or two from the conclusion of the divisional meetings.”

“The supreme council decided to delay it a bit and agreed that March would be all right.”

Abdullah said his decision was well received by the supreme council members and there was no dispute.

Abdullah made himself clear when asked what he had meant by facilitating an early transition.

“It is for handing over whatever is necessary, whatever regulations that I have to implement, anything... this will be decided by me and Najib,” he said.

Yesterday's supreme council meeting was preceded by a 30-minute meeting between the two leaders.

It was learnt that both leaders had discussed what Abdullah was going to tell the supreme council.

A council member said Abdullah at the outset of the meeting announced the decision Najib and he had agreed on.

“After that we just asked questions on various management matters like what would happen to the division elections and whether he would contest the party polls,” said the member.

NST-27/9/2008