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# Numbers stacked against Abdullah

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comment by **Zainon Ahmad**  
newsdesk@thesundaily.com

**ANY DAY** now, probably even as early as tomorrow, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (*pix*) will make the keenly-awaited announcement he promised he would be making before Oct 9, the date when the 191 Umno divisions can begin to elect their office-bearers and nominate those they want as their top national leaders.

Most people seem to have assumed that he is going to say that he has had enough and that one term as Umno president is all he can endure and, therefore, he is not offering himself for re-election. This, of course, would discourage but not prevent divisions loyal to him, or frustrated with his decision, from nominating him for the top post.

If that is what he is going to announce – and indications are that is what he is going to say and what many people expect him to say and will hear him say – it is clear he has been forced to respond, honourably maybe, to the groundswell

of members' disenchantment with his leadership – from members of the party supreme council to grassroots leaders throughout the country. The popular expectation is, of course, based on his so-called leadership transition plan which he was forced at the last

but most crucial supreme council meeting to bring forward from mid-2010 to March next year.

When Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who had finally acknowledged the sentiments on the ground and even rather candidly acquainted Abdullah with them, cancelled his date with the UN General Assembly, it started the wags talking, with some saying that the meeting was going to be Abdullah's Waterloo.

Indeed it was. In fact, going by a meeting a week earlier when he was openly and severely criticised by members before Najib stopped them, he knew he had lost control of the supreme council. And so, the argument goes, why would he still want to be president when he knew he was no longer wanted and had already announced that he is passing the baton to Najib much earlier than originally planned?

Of course, there are those who are not completely convinced. After all, Abdullah has been known to change his mind at the last minute. Also, many things could have happened since that supreme council meeting about 10 days ago.

He could have been persuaded that he should not go without a fight. The inner core of his advisers could have rallied and worked feverishly to shore up support for him during the Aidilfitri period and convince him that he has been promised the requisite number of nominations to qualify him to defend his presidency.

Also, the Doubting Thomases are still mystified by the postponement of the Umno annual general assembly and the party elections from December to March even though the divisional elections are scheduled to be over by early November. The postponement will now give those who have been nominated to be president, deputy president and vice-president and ordinary supreme council members almost four months of extra time to campaign.

But most people, especially those aspiring for important posts in the party, are sold on the idea that Abdullah would announce that he is not contesting. To these eager beavers, his inner core of advisers, trying as hard as they could, are unlikely to win sufficient promises of nominations, a number respectable enough for a sitting president. Already there are divisions, beginning

with Cheras and Titiwangsa, which have announced that they are nominating Najib and International Trade and Industry Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, the vice-president who was among the first to be openly critical of Abdullah, for president and deputy president.

In Terengganu, even old friend and former menteri besar Datuk Idris Jusoh, who was his point man in the state, has openly said that his Besut division is going to nominate Najib and Muhyiddin. Of the eight divisions in the state, probably only Kuala Terengganu, headed by Deputy Home Minister Senator Datuk Wan Farid Wan Salleh, also Abdullah's loyalist and former political secretary, seems likely to nominate him.

The most number of nominations he is likely to get from a state is probably from Penang where he is liaison chief as well as a major influence in the financially powerful Yayasan Bumiputera Pulau Pinang. His inner core of advisers is likely to succeed to elicit promises from about eight of the 13 divisions.

The figures the aspirants have been bandying about are anywhere between 36 and 62. Abdullah needs 58 to qualify to defend his post, if he is satisfactorily persuaded by his inner core of advisers. But for a sitting president, Abdullah knows that it would be most humiliating if he gets only 36, and that was why he is likely to heed an earlier warning that he does not contest.

Even if he gets 62, which means he qualifies, it would still be humiliating for a sitting president as it would be only about 30% of the total nominations the divisions are going to make. As incumbent he must get, as all past presidents had obtained, almost all of the nominations or at least not less than 80% of the total.

And so it looks like those who think that Abdullah is going to announce that he is not defending his position as party president are going to be right after all. By this time, Abdullah himself must have known that his chips are truly down and all that is left for him to do is to do "the right thing", something some party members said he should have done immediately after the results of the March 8 general election became known.

Since then – since leading the Barisan

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Nasional to its worst electoral performance – pressure began mounting for him to quit. If the outcome of the general election is not enough pressure, he had also to contend with a situation where Barisan Nasional coalition partners are disillusioned with Umno as their leader and blaming it for their poor showing.

The coalescing of the opposition parties, which made substantial gains in the general election, into a new power centre has forced Abdullah and the federal government he leads to make substantial concessions to its partners and their MPs to prevent them from gravitating to the other side.

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Because Abdullah refused to do "the right thing" immediately after the general election, Umno members led by Muhyiddin became rather uncharacteristically vocal in criticising his leadership of Umno and the BN.

Others were emboldened. Soon a trickle became a torrent. And now there is no preventing division leaders from standing up one after the other – even almost falling over themselves – to make known who they want as president and deputy president even though Machang and Kimanis would be the first two divisions to meet on Oct 10.

After all, isn't it always better to be too early rather than too late?

