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Youth/Wanita (Wind-up)

UMNO YOUTH AND WANITA WINGS GET NEW LEADERS

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 9 (Bernama) -- The first day of the four-day Umno general assembly today saw its two wings -- Youth and Wanita -- voting in new leaders.

However, the greatest upset was the defeat of Wanita Umno leader and International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, who had led the movement for 12 years, to Deputy Health Minister Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman.

Rafidah's defeat came as a shock because although it could not be denied that Dr Siti Zaharah would give a stiff fight, the odds up to the last minute of the election this morning were in favour of Rafidah retaining the post by a slim majority.

Dr Siti Zaharah polled 271 votes against 244 votes by Rafidah for a 27-vote majority in the straight fight.

The winds of change also swept over Umno Youth when Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi was elected the new leader after beating four other candidates including incumbent, Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Tamby Chik.

The elections of the two wings were held at a time when Umno, the main component of the Barisan Nasional, had declared an all-out war against money politics and banned all forms of campaigning.

They are also seen as a curtain raiser for the assembly proper which will be opened by Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad tomorrow.

Special attention will be focussed tomorrow on the election of the three vice-presidencies which are being contested by seven candidates and the 55 candidates vying for the 25 seats on the supreme council, the party's highest policy-making body.

The triennial party elections are normally seen as a much bigger affair than the general election because the party's president and deputy traditionally become the prime minister and deputy prime minister.

However, this time around Dr Mahathir and deputy president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim won their posts unopposed following the party's decision not to have the two posts contested.

At the end of the day, Rafidah appeared unable to accept her defeat.

Although she congratulated Dr Siti Zaharah, she declined to shake hands with and embrace the new Wanita Umno leader when asked to do so by cameramen, saying: "I am not a hypocritical politician. So there is no need to hug and kiss."

"Wait and see when Zaharah takes over. Based on my experience, it is easier said than done," she said.

"But people like Zaharah herself rise as a result of our struggle. The young people that we see today are also there because because we open the door to them, unlike in the past," she said.

Rafidah said that as a minister she would be going to Europe on Tuesday and the people there would surely be surprised why a leader like herself was no longer accepted by her party.

Dr Siti Zaharah and Zahid, however, accepted their victories calmly.

Dr Siti Zaharah said she accepted the result as something normal as she had always been confident of the choice the delegates would make.

She said she adopted a positive attitude when she took the decision to contest the top post of Umno's women's wing.

Zahid, the MP for Bagan Datoh and former Umno Youth information chief,

called on the losers to forget the past and to join in the efforts to strengthen the movement.

He said he did not view his election to the top post in the movement as having been bestowed a great title, but instead as a responsibility that he had to discharge well.

One question that arises is Rafidah's and Rahim's political future following their defeat today.

Although Rafidah stressed that she would continue with her duties as a minister without having to divide her time between the post and that of Wanita Umno, her position in the Cabinet depends on the prime minister.

Speculation is expected to be rife on whether Dr Siti Zaharah will be appointed a minister because for now at least, the new Wanita Umno leader is a deputy minister whereas Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail, who failed to win the vice-head's post, is a full minister.

Rahim appeared sad at failing to retain the only political post he had and refused comment.

With his victory, Zahid is now in a strong position to be appointed to a government post in keeping with his new political post. -- BERNAMA

AU NMO JK