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Bigger things to come for Napsiah?

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DATUK Napsiah Omar has that slightly breathless look of someone in anticipation of a long day ahead and, she does.

The deputy Wanita Umno leader has to go off to meet "someone important" after the interview.

Then, she has to shoot south to Negri Sembilan in time for a breaking-of-fast gathering with the Umno wakil rakyat in the State where she will put up the night since there is a State Executive Council meeting the next morning.

She usually spends the afternoon after the meeting dealing with the steady stream of people who troop in with requests ranging from letters of recommendation to low-cost housing.

But this commuting between the centre and the periphery is not new. She has been at it since 1982 as the MP for Kuala Pilah and Pilah, a State seat not far from where she was born and which she contested in the general election of 1995.

The move has not been without much political speculation and even some amount of controversy for this former National Unity and Social Development Minister.

As everyone would know by now, talk began almost immediately that Napsiah's move from a parliamentary to a State seat signalled the unprecedented possibility of a woman Menteri Besar.

The speculation must have done Napsiah's ego - yes, women have egos too! - quite a bit of good then, but at the same time, it must have ruffled feathers at State level.

Still, Napsiah's response, when asked whether she is going to be made an MB, is somewhat unexpected. She throws back her head, slaps both hands on the arms of her chair and laughs loudly.

Then, sobering up, she says, carefully picking her words: "Actually, it was very awkward for me. I can understand any incumbent being jittery over such talk but, basically, it's all up to the president."

Apparently, things were more than awkward for her especially when it was time for her to join Menteri Besar Mohamad Isa Abdul Samad's State team.

So awkward, in fact, that she finally had to "take the bull by the horns".

"I sat down with him (Mohamad Isa) and I told him: don't threaten me. I said I came to the State on the instruction of the president and as loyal members of Umno, we follow the instructions of the president, so it's best that we work together."

"As for the position of the MB, I told him: it's not yours forever. It could be mine, or it could be Hashimuddin's, Datuk Waad (Mansor)'s or Datuk Shamsul (Bahari)'s. He agreed that he could not be there forever, that this was his fourth term."

Certainly, even if Mohamad Isa did not make things difficult for Napsiah, he could hardly be expected to go out of his way to make it easy for her.

She claims that thrashing it out has helped smoothed things between them. Besides, Mohamad Isa is still up there and Napsiah is still where she is.

She now spends at least two days in the week at the Wanita Umno office on the 37th floor of Menara Datuk Onn.

"KL is still the place to lobby for funds for my constituency and my

women's activities ..." she explains of her time there.

Her office there overlooks some of the most fantastic traffic jams to be found in Kuala Lumpur. The outer office has an interesting combination of black-and-white photographs of Malay women wielding rifles and bunches of artificial flower that Wanita circles are so partial to.

Her room, in contrast, seems almost bereft; the sole decoration is a vase embossed with what looks like a sketch of Tunku Abdul Rahman.

But Napsiah's personality brings life to the room.

She laughs easily and her English comes in complete sentences; there are no clumsy ah(s) or er(s) or that Malaysian inclination to a hotchpotch of Malay and English.

They say she is a cross between Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, respectively the past and present Wanita chiefs.

Next to the rugged Rafidah, she seems more soft, almost girlish. But when contrasted with the rather sultry-looking Siti Zaharah, she comes across as a mother figure.

And she is plump in the way of so many Umno women who seem unable to resist the pitfalls of those endless rounds of jamuan which come with the inevitable array of greasy food, gooey-sweet kuih and sugary drinks.

Her loose, kingfisher blue baju kebaya labuh hides those excesses quite well and there, smack on her cleavage is a fabulous-looking cluster of pale, grey pearls that match the lustrous pair on her earlobes.

Even as a Minister, she lacked the airs and overly sense of self-importance so quickly acquired by political leaders, male or female.

She was not only approachable, but very accessible.

"She's one of those handful of top women politicians able to grasp women's issues on an intellectual level," says a woman journalist who had nothing but praise for the way Napsiah had lent her support to the then embryonic Domestic Violence Act.

Even Wanita members not on her side and who criticise her for "lack of focus" and for being "less than punctual" and "easily excitable", admit she is humble, able to come down to the level of the grassroots and "has a good heart".

But perhaps one of her chief assets as a leader is her open mind when it comes to ideas and issues.

This perhaps explains why she has taken to the Women Institute of Management - a body aimed at equipping women with managerial skills - with such gusto.

And her academic qualifications are impressive: a Bachelor's degree in Zoology and Botany from the Australian National University and Master in Nutrition from Cornell University.

Like many Malay women of her time, she was breaking barriers in a way that women a mere generation before her had not imagined possible.

Napsiah left for Australia to do her 'A' level in 1961 and it was only in her third year at ANU that she secured a government scholarship.

She was probably the first Malay woman in ANU and tackling pure science at a time when most women were still resigned to domestic science.

She had enrolled to study medicine at Sydney University when her father passed away. She returned home to join Felda as a nutrition officer. It also marked the start of her interest in Umno politics.

In the meantime, she got married and when her anthropologist husband left for further studies in the United States, she tagged along, returned in 1972 with her Master and began lecturing at Universiti Pertanian Malaysia.

She claims her political career was "by accident". Sometime in the late 1970s, she had contemplated going overseas for a PhD.

But her husband persuaded her to stay back because the children were

still young. As "compensation", he promised his full support for her increasing involvement in Umno.

Her first chance in electoral politics came in 1982 when she won the Kuala Pilah parliamentary seat, becoming the first woman MP in Negri Sembilan.

In the meantime, her husband passed away and her reply, when asked how she has managed to juggle politics and single parenthood, was: "Thank God, I managed to do it ... my children are not punks or drug addicts."

In fact, the children are doing as well as any parent can hope for. Her eldest daughter read economics at the London School of Economics and is now with a securities firm here.

Her second, also a girl, is also at the LSE, studying law; her son is doing physics at the Imperial College, London; and the youngest girl is tackling her 'A' level.

The last two years have been challenging ones for Napsiah. Apart from adapting to the Federal-State change, she had to fend off a stiff challenge to her position as deputy Wanita chief at last year's Umno election.

But what still seems to rankle her was Rafidah's choice of Datuk Paduka Zaleha Ismail over her as running mate.

"She abandoned me," says Napsiah.

And this was when I discovered a hitherto hidden talent of Napsiah: she is a gifted mimic. Relating a crucial conversation between her and Rafidah in the run-up to the Wanita election, she mimics the latter perfectly, so much so that if I had shut my eyes, I would have thought it was Rafidah herself.

It is quite clear that Rafidah's decision was purely based on survival instincts.

Despite her outward confidence over Siti Zaharah's challenge and in spite of Napsiah's previous unerring loyalty (so much so that some saw Napsiah as a yes-man), she wanted a running mate of national stature.

In retrospect, Napsiah says that being "dropped" by Rafidah turned out to be a "turning point" for her.

"The Wanita people called up, some even came to see me, to tell me I had their support."

Then, in a more serious tone, she says: "This is a learning experience for all budding politicians. In politics, whatever you do, you must always look after your base."

As for the reigning Wanita chief, she says: "One always thinks that tomorrow is a better day, so give her a chance. She may be able to carry the day."

Talking about the Umno election seems to have ignited her fighting spirit and she says in a burst of candour: "What upsets me is the way people use religion. They say a woman cannot become an MB; that a man, for religious reasons, is more suitable."

"I have yet to hear or see an MB giving a sermon in the mosque apart from Datuk Nik Aziz (Nik Mat) and he is an ulama. The MB's post is administrative, it's the Sultan who's the religious head of State."

"Moreover, Penang has a non-Muslim Chief Minister, Sabah too, and the Government still performs."

"Really, it's nothing strange for Negri Sembilan ... the first three chieftains of Negri Sembilan were women, then the men took over."

It is quite obvious there is more than meets the eye to the speculation about the MB's seat in Negri Sembilan for as Napsiah eventually admits: "It was the deputy president of Umno (Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim) who told me to take the State seat."

"He said he had discussed with the president. My first thought was that

I had been given the axe but he convinced me otherwise ... and the promise was glorious."

Then, like a suspense novelist, she says: "But the detailed conversation ... you'll have to read my memoirs."

After a thoughtful pause, she says: "I believe (Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) is a responsible gentleman, he knows what he is doing. I'll abide by his decision. If I do become the MB, it's a bonus. If I don't c'est la vie!"

"But believe me, I'm just as capable as the next man; I can deliver the goods."

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