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Rafidah: I'm in touch with Wanita grassroots

Q. Do you have any grooming secrets?

A. Just Pond's cleansing cream, soap and water to wash my face, and a L'oreal face cream ... very cheap. It seems to be working very well for me. I cut my own hair, I don't go to hairdressing salons. My tailor costs only RM40. I am very cheap to maintain.

I went to tailoring class and I can sew pant suits. That (tailoring) was the first thing I did when I got married ... and also piano lessons. I can cook but I don't want to. It's a question of effort and priorities.

Q. Wanita Umno people complain they have no access to you at home.

A. I won't have people marching into my house day and night. They've no business interfering in people's private life. I'm sorry but if access means that, then I'm not accessible. I love my private life. Once I'm in my bedroom, even my children don't disturb me.

Q. What is it like, being on the margins of Umno politics?

A. It has not affected me, not in the slightest iota.

Q. People thought you did not lose with grace at the Wanita Umno election.

A. The media got it wrong. When (Datuk) Napsiah (Omar) won, I got up and kissed her. When (Datuk Dr) Siti Zaharah (Sulaiman) won, I stood up and shook her hand and said: 'Congratulations'. There was a photo in The Star. But some of these photographers, these men, they said: 'Datuk, Datuk, peluklah! Cium, cium!' You tell me, would you?

I am not used to that kind of nonsense, acting out things, even to people who are close to me. You don't act it out, you do it spontaneously. But no, they were going: 'Datuk, peluk! Cium!' Come on, I'm not a hypocrite, don't tell me what to do. I was the first to stand up and say: 'Congratulations, Siti Zaharah'.

But that wasn't enough for the photographers. They want me to kiss her on the cheek after all the things they did to me. You crazy? It's artificial.

Q. Have you had any dealings with Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah?

A. No, no dealings, but we are in the supreme council.

Q. Will you go for the top Wanita post in 1999?

A. I don't want to talk about that. Let's just say, I am doing my work, I am keeping touch with the Wanita, I am in touch with my grassroots.

Q. Hasn't your success as a Minister been at the expense of your grassroots contact?

A. No, I won't say that. People don't realise that when I go to the grassroots, I do not get the coverage. That's why I say that newspapers are sometimes not fair. They scold me, when I say that. How could I have come up without grassroots support?

The problem is, even when I'm in the remotest of kampungs, the questions asked will be about WTO, industry, trade. I have more grassroots activities than some Wanita people but they get the (local angle) because they are not asked about sanctions by America ... you see?

Q. They say the highest women go in Umno is Wanita chief. They don't even vie for the vice-president's post.

A. Wanita chief is the equivalent of vice-president in Umno. If women want to vie for the president's post, why not?

It's a question of what you want in life. But whatever you do, do it well. That's so much more valuable than just holding a post and not doing

anything. For that matter, I have never toppled anybody, it's not worth it.

I am MP for Kuala Kangsar and it has never crossed my mind to get a position ... I don't even want to be division chairman. I know my limits.

Q. Are women still reluctant about politics?

A. They are not reluctant, but don't judge them by the numbers in Parliament, or those who come up to the highest levels. Politics in this country is really based on the strength of women especially at the grassroots.

Q. Do women approach politics differently from men?

A. I wouldn't say so. Like men, they go in because they feel they want to do something for the country, the people. But we are beginning to see trends where some women come into politics hoping for some gains, positions to be held. That I can vouch for. But the majority still come in, support, do whatever they can and don't aspire to be anything.

Q. A woman politician told me that women with spectacular careers, when you go to their homes then you know it's been at the expense of the family.

A. It's true and it has always been my principle that you must have a very good balance in your life. When you go into politics and aspire for a post, you should never ever put aside priorities such as your family just to satisfy your personal ego.

Q. Do you think the shares allocation issue affected your reputation?

A. No, why should my image be tarnished. My son-in-law should not be looked on as my son-in-law. There were two lawyers who got it based on what they are qualified for. How come the other lawyer did not get mentioned? He's also a Malay lawyer. It was political, I don't regard my image as tarnished and there's nothing to hide.

In fact, it was during my tenure here that the shares allocation has been rationalised in terms of procedure. There used to be no committee before. Now, the secretariat processes (applications), members of the secretariat are present at the committee meeting and I have a group of all my senior officers with me deciding.

I have nothing to hide. It's not free shares, my son-in-law paid for them. But people can choose to interpret.

Q. How's your relationship with Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim?

A. It's very difficult to talk about relationships. I only talk about relationships with personal friends and family, rarely with those in government. Those are working relationships, purely professional. There are no endearing relationships in politics. All the endearing relationships are in my personal life.

Q. People say you are where you are because of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

A. I have to correct that. I came into government during Tun Hussein Onn's time, in 1976. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir continued having me in the Cabinet, then transferred me here after seven years in Public Enterprises. People think I came here from nowhere. I have been in the government 21 years.

Of course, as Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir found I was suitable for the job, so he continued to pick me. If he thought I was no good, he would have chucked me out ... he did chuck quite a number of people.

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