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Unconventional Marina is still breaking barriers

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IT would be difficult not to notice the Marinara along Kuala Lumpur's Jalan Tun Razak.

And equally difficult to ignore is the fact that the building, in the mid-stages of construction, belongs to Marina Yusoff.

If skyscrapers are phallic symbols for their male owners, then the eponymous Marinara must surely be Marina's way of stating that she can match the guys at their urban games.

But the high-rise is clearly Marina's pride and joy for she recalls with pleasure how her eldest daughter Ida Nerina (yes, the actress!) had recently remarked: "Mummy, when I look at the building, I feel a surge of pride."

Marina of Marinara is better known as Marina the politician or, as she insists, former politician. Apparently, 1990, the year she made her maiden bid in a general election was also her political swansong.

"She simply went off one day ... just threw in the towel," says a former Parti Melayu Semangat '46 colleague.

Two years after quitting the party which she had so defiantly joined after the Umno split, she returned to Umno and proceeded to direct her attention to her building project.

And now, still not quite over the tragic death of her teenage daughter three years ago, she says she is quite at peace with herself.

"I'm very happy now with what I am doing," she says as we battle the noon traffic to get to the Lake Club for lunch.

Marina may have passed the half-century mark last month but she is still incredibly good-looking.

She still turns heads going by the way the men at the club almost sprained their necks as she swept her way through one restaurant after another looking for a quiet place where we could eat and chat.

Her naturally wavy hair is reminiscent of the early Princess Di, her skin has an almost translucent quality and she has lips that Madonna would die for.

Her smart, business-like suit sits well on her once svelte figure which was said to have obsessed the imagination of more than a few Umno leaders.

And, of course, those eyes which a now retired Umno politician recalls "were like deep pools in which I would have gladly drowned".

Marina herself admits that she has lived an interesting, if somewhat turbulent, life.

Born to a modern-minded pair of parents - her father was a school teacher while her mother hailed from the well-known Merican clan of Penang - she grew up in Kota Baru where her father was posted.

Her childhood was not exactly ordinary for her parents taught ballroom dancing to the then Kelantan Sultan. Marina recalls having "good, clean fun" as a young girl in Kota Baru, going about in dresses and attending parties.

Despite the active social life, she excelled academically and moved on to Form Six at Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur.

About one of the more conventional aspects of her eventful life was getting married at 19 to her first love. After less than a year of marriage, she persuaded him to accompany her to London to study law.

There, her husband enrolled in a law course while she studied from his notes. She graduated half a year ahead of time despite having a child and

another on the way.

Being the second Malay woman to qualify as a lawyer - the first being Siti Normah Yaakob, now an Appeal Court judge - guaranteed her instant fame. It marked the start of what was to be a career in the limelight.

Looking through the now yellowed newsclippings about her, it is easy to understand how Marina was such a darling of the media.

She was a ravishing beauty, immensely photogenic and had intelligent and forthright things to say about issues.

Besides, she was toppling one barrier after another and at a time when women were still expected to tip-toe a few steps behind their menfolk.

After scoring another first to become the first Malay woman magistrate, she moved up as Sessions Court President before leaving government service for Bank Bumiputra as its legal adviser.

By then, she had had three children and her marriage ended in divorce.

Prime Minister Tun Razak Hussein who was ever on the lookout for new talent for Umno sent emissaries to offer her the post of political secretary to Tan Sri Fatimah Hashim, then Wanita Umno leader.

She declined but agreed to a seat on the Wanita executive committee.

Then, in what was seen as a fluke shot, she became deputy Wanita chief under Tan Sri Aishah Ghani. Aishah, nominated for the two top positions, sailed unopposed into the No 2 post and beat Fatimah for the top post.

As a result, the deputy's position was opened to the floor for voting and Marina beat the other nominee Fatimah Majid by a single vote.

She was probably one of the earliest version of what is today known as "helicopter politicians".

Marina says she had "a lot of support from the bottom but no guidance from the top because I was regarded as a threat by one or two leaders".

It is a well-known fact that Marina and Aishah were as incompatible as day and night in Wanita Umno.

By then, Marina was no stranger to controversy. Her flamboyant style and independent viewpoint did not go down well with women in Umno.

For instance, they frowned on her penchant for modern clothes. Thus, when she criticised a move to allow schoolgirls to wear the baju kurung she was perceived as being anti-national dress.

"I merely thought it would segregate the school-going population," she says.

In another instance, her comments that a proposal to penalise men keeping mistresses would be idle as long as the law went gently on bigshots was read as being unsympathetic to women.

"These two issues did a lot of damage," she admits.

By then too, her personal life had become a matter of some controversy.

She was no docile, traditional, Malay woman and neither did she seem to have patience for other docile, traditional types.

Thus, at parties (known as functions in these moral times), she gravitated towards the men; she did not hide the fact that she enjoyed their company nor was she adverse to having fun.

And it seems particularly sad to read her saying shortly after she remarried that "I am very happy now I have a husband to shelter me from the malicious talk that has been a part of my life the past seven years. Being married means I can go about more freely without any gossip".

Those words must have bled every feminist's heart.

As a young, attractive and vivacious divorcee, she suffered every prejudice in the book. Women, especially the married ones, saw her as a threat.

But her remarriage fuelled even more controversy for her second husband had divorced his wife to marry her. To make matters worse, his former wife was in Wanita Umno.

Thus, although she won a seat on the Umno supreme council in 1974, she quit politics a year later.

She cited as reasons her devotion to husband and children but the groundswell of resentment over her personal life had grown too much even for her to ignore.

"Wanita Umno leaders of that time, and even now, called for a certain kind of personality. Marina was very clever but she lacked restraint," says a woman Umno politician.

But Ahmad Shabery Chik, a former colleague in the now defunct Semangat '46, says: "In politics, men can party, womanise and get away with a lot, but not women. Marina suffered because she refused to play the appendage role."

Former Umno Youth strongman Datuk Harun Idris seems to think that Marina's political career did not go far mainly because she was not the "yes, sir" type.

But she enjoyed immense support from the men and in 1981, she won a supreme council seat although her nomination was not endorsed by the Wanita wing.

There is clearly an adversarial edge to Marina's personality. Some attribute this to her decision to gang up with the "Team B" of Umno.

But a journalist covering the events then says she felt she had been unfairly treated by the old guard. Whatever the reasons, she was one of Semangat '46's most visible leaders and among the most vocal critics of the resurrected Umno.

Asked why she decided to rejoin Umno, she says: "We agreed that if we lost we would go back to Umno. When we lost, I asked Tengku Razaleigh: what about it? He said: if you want to go in, you go. So, I left (Semangat '46). Besides, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has done a lot for the country. Many of the things we criticised him for he has corrected."

Then she adds in her I-don't-care-what-you-think-I'll-say-what-I-like way: "But there is still too much favouritism in the privatisation schemes."

Marina's commercial interests, as many are aware, suffered when she was in opposition politics. It was only after she left Semangat '46 that her Marina project finally took off.

"You can't go far in business when you are in the opposition," she admits.

And in hindsight, she says those early turbulent years in politics might have been more fruitfully spent with her children.

"You think all those women politicians are so successful until you go to their home; then you know they are making a big mistake. The children are neglected, the home is neglected. Politics spoiled my legal practice ... people constantly dropping into your office and house. My children were not happy about it."

Is it not possible then for women to find an equilibrium in politics?

"They should get into politics when the children are much bigger. They would also be more mature to advise and lead," she says.

Her remaining four children, except for the youngest who is studying abroad, are gainfully employed. She takes pride in having put them through school in England "without once asking for a scholarship".

She has also been single the past 17 years. Her last two marriages, she says, are no encouragement to remarry.

There is also something faintly romantic in her for she declares: "You do everything for them (her husbands), yet they don't appreciate it and go for other women ... that was the most hurtful thing. Since I can't seem to find a man who will be faithful to me, it's best I spend the rest of my life alone."

Marina says she has also rediscovered Islam. She read and re-read the Quran and the Hadith after Selina, her daughter, died in a dawn car crash.

Until today, she is upset that the media projected Selina as a party-goer and her, a negligent mother. She had, in fact, been strict with Selina following a premonition three years earlier that she might lose this daughter.

"All those cruel remarks ... it was very, very painful."

Marina's next important project is to be a religio-educational foundation in Selina's name.

The days when Marina's every move was noted by the media - she made news even when she fell while out horse-riding - is long past.

Her detractors, and there is no shortage of them, suggest that her personal life overshadowed whatever political impact she may have made. But even they admit that Marina was always somewhat ahead of her time. In more than one way, she is testimony to how far Malay women have come in the short span of 30 years.

She became a lawyer on her own steam and at a time when the profession was still a domain of non-Malay men and she is now in a field where women still hesitate to venture.

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