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Focus-Politics-Zaharah

GENERAL ELECTION: ACID TEST FOR SITI ZAHARAH

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PUTRAJAYA: Much has been said about the forthcoming general election but for Umno wanita chief Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, it is certainly most crucial as her political career is also at stake.

With only about three years to her credit as the leader of the movement, Siti Zaharah has to harness all her resources available to woo the women voters, who make up 54 percent of the electorate, to cast their votes for the Barisan Nasional in general and Umno in particular.

Siti Zaharah, who is Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, knows that ensuring a sound victory for BN is not something that could be taken for granted.

Foremost is the question of solidarity and unity among its 1.5 million members arising from the 1996 party election which saw Siti Zaharah beating incumbent Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz for the top wanita post.

Not least of Siti Zaharah's burden is, like most other Umno leaders, the urgent need to bring about stability to the party following the expulsion of former Deputy Prime Minister and Umno Deputy President Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998. It cannot be denied that the action against Anwar had to some extent disturbed the otherwise solid feature of Umno.

Now, after having led the movement for a term, Siti Zaharah said the unity displayed by the Wanita members should not be doubted at all, for that had been her top priority upon assuming its leadership.

"We are also now better organised and I find it much easier to mobilise our machinery to face the election," Siti Zaharah said during a recent interview here.

She feels that the Wanita members should be praised for their commitment and sincerity towards the party and its leadership, and their resolve to work as a team.

The Anwar episode, she said, did not affect the movement in any way, as proven by the fact that no disciplinary action was taken against any of its members.

"I do not deny that initially there were some groups who had sympathised with Anwar and subsequently with the course of action taken by his wife, Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail.

"I have tackled this issue directly, based on the principle that every action taken must be based on facts and evidence...because I still regard that no one had deviated, unless information to the contrary is made available," she said.

On the perception that she was in Anwar's camp, she said, "People can read our movements. If we begin to stammer while talking and stagger while moving, they will definitely lose their confidence in us.

"However, I have stated it loud and clear as to my stand and the unwavering support and loyalty towards the party immediately after the decision (to expel Anwar) was made, and this was proven by my subsequent works."

Siti Zaharah also said, "If one of my legs is on the other side while another on this side, how can I function smoothly to mobilise the movement's machinery. Thus, I must stress once and for all that I am not under the shadow of anybody.

"The women members had accepted me and when I go to the ground, the society too accepts me. Thus, it is obvious that the Anwar episode is

already far behind," she added.

She also said that party president, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, had on many occasions stressed on the importance of cooperation among the leaders and the members and "this we have complied with faithfully".

On the coming general election, Siti Zaharah said it would indirectly provide an opportunity for the movement to gauge the success of its IT literacy or cyber programmes for the women.

The projects, introduced at several Umno divisions and state liaison offices, would eventually become the network for information dissemination on current issues and guidelines on how to deal with rumours and accusations which could tarnish the image of the government.

Initially, all the inputs are election-related information, the wanita's machinery networks and other pertinent issues.

The movement is also ready with its "Gerak Mesra" programme which would involve the mobilisation of more than 1,600 election workers, who had already undergone three days of basic training at 10 special camps all over the country.

At the state level, several thousands more workers would be assigned to the divisions and branches, with the objective of promoting unity among the local communities and simultaneously obtain their support for Umno during the coming election.

"I am convinced that they could win the hearts of both the rural and the urban voters" through the various local social programmes, she said.

Apart from "Gerak Mesra" there is also the "Gerak 10" (G10) activity, which involves the mobilisation of women election workers to make house or even office calls to solicit votes and gather information on those inclined not to vote for BN and also to compile a list of new voters.

With all the preparations "battle-ready", the movement is now waiting for its candidates to be named for the polls. Zaharah said the movement can propose but the final choice is with the leadership.

Stressing that Umno Wanita is not short of qualified candidates, she said education is not the main criterion. What is important is quality leadership, authoritativeness, industry and the ability to appreciate and understand the wishes of the masses.

"However, we must also try to understand the political calculation of our leaders because there are also other parties that need to be taken into account and to be contented with, apart from other factors which could decide the outcome of the election," she said.

In this connection, Zaharah said she had reminded all members to accept in good faith any decision made by the party and they should not abandon their bigger responsibility of ensuring the BN victory during the election simply because their candidates are not selected.

Siti Zaharah said there was a proposal that in order to increase the number of women at the various decision-making bodies such as the state Excos, more members of the movement should be given the opportunity to contest for seats in the Umno Supreme Council in the near future. Currently, the council is dominated by the youth wing and the main stream candidates.

In this regard, she said she is disappointed in that for the past few years, it was the women themselves who had obstructed the promotion of new faces from among the movement by throwing their support behind certain candidates who, in most cases, were already holding high positions such as ministers, deputy ministers and parliamentary secretaries.

However, she stressed, under the present election mood, the Wanita members are more concerned with a major victory for Umno and the BN.

"We are now ready to return Umno and BN to power and we will not allow anyone to stand in our way," said Siti Zaharah. -- Bernama

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