

15/08/1999

Siti Zaharah must cool things in Wanita and brace for polls

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FOR a large part of the last fortnight, Datuk Napsiah Omar's handphone has trilled almost non-stop.

The deputy Wanita Umno chief has been deluged by telephone calls from people in the party, and especially from Wanita Umno, from all over the country.

"They want to know what is going on," says Napsiah.

Napsiah has obviously been doing a great deal of explaining for her normally well-modulated voice has grown a trifle hoarse, and there's even a hint of exasperation to it because it can't have been much fun repeating the same thing to one caller after another.

Many callers wanted information - beyond what they were getting in the media - and some, especially State level Wanita Umno leaders, were concerned about what was happening.

Then, there were the merely curious because, despite attempts by Wanita Umno leaders to play down the issue, it is undeniable that a crisis of sorts has occurred in the movement, and Umno members being Umno members make it their business to know.

Most of them would, by now, be quite well-acquainted with the nitty-gritty of the events leading to the annulment of the Wanita exco reshuffle.

The chronology, it is said, began with party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad calling the Wanita exco to a meeting at his Putrajaya office late one afternoon on July 30.

Suffice to say it was not a tea party sort of meeting, particularly given that the meeting concluded with the exco being instructed to meet at least once a fortnight with Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Mohd Khalil Yaakob in attendance.

Two days later, the movement's head Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman announced a reshuffle of her exco, a move that caught both those promoted and demoted by surprise. Most of them learnt about it from the primetime news on television that evening.

The next day, a group of 11 exco members drove out to the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport in Subang where they, somehow, managed to persuade the Prime Minister - he had just flown back from Ipoh - to see them for an "urgent discussion", there and then.

Presumably, the subject of this "urgent discussion" was the surprise reshuffle.

That very afternoon, Siti Zaharah received word that Dr Mahathir wanted to see her. She arrived at his office with two close aides but, eventually, went in alone with Mohd Khalil sitting in.

At the Umno supreme council meeting the following evening, the Umno president announced that Siti Zaharah - she was not present, having submitted a medical chit citing high blood pressure - had agreed to reverse her reshuffle decision.

And, in between all these startling incidents, came a tide of words from a variety of Wanita Umno leaders.

Some insisted everything was okey-dokey, others alluded to camps in the movement, yet others scolded those who talked about camps, but almost everyone spoke about closing ranks, burying the past and focusing on the general election.

Apparently, the part about focusing on the general election is not

entirely platitudinous. The women are genuinely concerned that the lack of concord at the top should not undermine their role during elections.

Wanita Umno members are the mainstay of the very precise door-to-door campaign employed by Umno at every election and the men in the party are often the first to admit it.

"The Wanita role is pivotal. To a large extent, Umno is kept going at the grass roots by the untiring efforts of the ladies ... that's why Wanita Umno has to stay strong," says Umno supreme council member Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

The women are the perayu undi (literally translates as 'those appealing for votes') during general elections and their work, augmented by Kemas officials and other Umno members, is carried out in three main stages.

The first involves a reconnaissance of Malay households in their respective parliamentary constituencies during which they will, among other things, identify households/voters who are with the BN, and those who need "special attention" and who will be dealt with by those fanning out in the second stage.

Thus, by the time Parliament is dissolved the perayu undi, making their third and most exhaustive round, would already have more than a passing knowledge of Malay voter sentiment in their constituency.

Some constituencies like Merbok have completed their first round and are waiting for the handbills - the voter list from the Election Commission - before moving onto the second round. In Wangsa Maju, in the Federal Territory, the women have already covered 26,000 of the 41,000 Malay voters listed.

"Just imagine the amount of work ahead ... there's no time to squabble," says the division's Wanita head Dr Noridah Ibrahim.

Umno people are also fond of pointing out that high politics and the Umno grass roots are "inter-related and yet apart" and this could not be truer than in the case of the women's wing. Or as another Wanita Umno division head puts it: "The fight is in Menara Dato Onn ... on the ground, we are okay."

The Wanita grass roots is often the most stable component of the party, loyal, less prone to leap to conclusions and, as Syed Hamid says, "willing to listen with an open heart".

"The women work, regardless of who the leader is. Even during (Datuk Seri) Rafidah's (Aziz) time ... there were people who did not support her but still worked for the party," says Senator Faridah Abu Hassan, Wanita head of the Cheras division.

But it remains to be seen whether all these women will put what they say into practice although some think the onus to do so rests more heavily on Siti Zaharah as the leader of this 1.2 million-strong movement.

Siti Zaharah, one could say, is suffering the consequences of the high expectations that came with her 1996 victory over her predecessor, Rafidah.

In challenging Rafidah, she was effectively saying she could provide a better leadership and that is a claim that she is still trying to live up to.

But her supporters speak of her back-to-back schedule and the time she spends on the ground.

"You should see her programme. She tries to answer invitations from all over ... the grass roots is very supportive of her," says Noridah who, incidentally, had been slotted to take over as assistant treasurer in the reshuffle that was not to be.

They point to Gerak Mesra, the Wanita Umno election-oriented training programme which has seen some 2,000 women attending a total of 10 camps.

Says Noridah: "She goes to practically every camp ... and she

participates. You have to appreciate that. There's no doubt she has performed very well."

Then there is what they deem her glowing achievement, Asnita (Amanah Saham Wanita) which issued a 10 per cent dividend on its first year.

Supporters say the problem is not Siti Zaharah but those who could not accept her leadership and did not lend her the co-operation she needed.

Her detractors say she failed to appreciate the fact that her victory was a narrow one which meant there was a huge chunk of Rafidah supporters to win over, or to pujuk, as the Malays say. Even the Wanita exco was quite evenly split between supporters of Rafidah and Siti Zaharah.

"Siti's mistake was that she regarded them as enemies rather than potential supporters," says a Wanita exco member.

To compound matters, she is said to rely mainly on two persons - executive secretary Zuraidah Musib and her own sister Dr Ruby Sulaiman.

Not only is Ruby not in the exco, but the pair are perceived as being less than familiar with what is known as the "Umno tradition", that unwritten set of customs which is often as important as the written part.

The range of grievances that this group has against her are, frankly, quite astonishing - from complaints about her conduct at meetings to her leadership style.

Even Asnita fails to impress this group for they claim that Wanita Umno is merely the marketing arm and has no shareholding in the investment scheme. And when Asnita donated RM20,000 to the movement during the last party assembly, the same group scoffed at what they thought was a paltry amount.

Others are at pains to stress that the current issue is not just about Siti Zaharah supporters versus Rafidah supporters.

The reason: three of those she had tried to demote - Azizah Samad, Saripah Aminah Bee Syed Mohamed and Fatimah Suhaimi - used to be her staunchest supporters who had slogged to campaign for her in 1996. Even her running mate has not been spared; Napsiah was removed as head of the Wanita management six months ago.

Actually, Siti Zaharah is said to have contemplated a reshuffle as early as March this year, but was advised against it by several of those she spoke to.

And after the whole affair blew up in her face, she had confided to a Wanita figure that she merely wanted a "stronger team" who could work with her, that her intention was not to punish.

Yet another result of the reshuffle has been all sorts of pressure on, and questions asked of those she had tried to promote.

"Whatever has happened, my loyalty is to the party and leadership. It has not changed from the moment I joined Umno," says one of them, Maryani Mohd Yit.

Meanwhile, Wanita veteran Tan Sri Aishah Ghani says: "I've spent so much time in Umno and my advice to everyone is to go on with their duties. They don't have much choice."

Many Wanita Umno figures say they intend to take the advice of their party president who had, at the July 30 meeting, told them to put their differences in the freezer and if they wanted to, they could reheat it after the general election.

And while those around Siti Zaharah keep stressing that she has grass roots support, it ought to be pointed out that organising and mobilising the grass roots is not a one-woman job.

She will still require the co-operation of other top and middle level women leaders to get the Wanita machinery into top working order.

Much now depends on Siti Zaharah to create a temperature which, even if it is not cool enough to freeze differences, will at least cool down

feelings and enable everyone to get down to work.  
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