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Wanita Umno should mend rift and focus on coming polls

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AFTER a stormy week, calm should return to the Wanita Umno movement at least for the moment as they have to stand united for a common cause.

The Wanita leaders and members have agreed to set aside their differences and work together in ensuring victory for the Barisan Nasional government in the coming general election.

But surely after all the allegations and counter-allegations and rebukes among the Wanita exco members, feelings have been wounded, and pride and image dented.

After the shock reshuffle announced by Wanita chief Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman on Monday, came the equally shocking decision by her to withdraw the changes on the advice of party president, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, two days later.

The matter should have been resolved, but the following day, Wanita exco member Datuk Maznah Hamid deemed it fit to make a public exposure of the existence of three factions within the movement, and the politicking and back-stabbing that has been going on. She also revealed weaknesses in Siti Zaharah's leadership.

Ironically, attention now turned to Maznah, better known as the "Iron Lady". She was lambasted for opening a can of worms. But the outspoken Maznah stands by her statement, hoping that everybody realises the mistakes and work towards a compromise in solving the issues.

"Everyone knows that there are factions in the movement, but they are just not saying it out.

"They tell the Press a lot of things but not to quote them (in the newspapers)," says Maznah, a businesswoman.

Although some exco members have denied that there were camps, nevertheless many could sense the undercurrents.

Certain exco members were known to be sidelined. And that certain exco members simply could not get along with others.

Some say that factions and politicking were not the issue, but the reshuffle itself, so they rapped Maznah for her comments.

But looking at the other side of the coin, the reshuffle, in the first place, was initiated by Siti Zaharah as she needed a stronger team as some exco members were not supporting her.

"PM knew that something was brewing," insists a member, who claims to be a long-time observer.

"That's why he asked the exco members at the July 30 meeting with him whether everything was all right and told them to close ranks."

She revealed that while Siti Zaharah gave the impression that everything was okay, some of the exco members present were shaking their heads.

"But when this thing (reshuffle) happened, they called me up in the middle of the night to ask for views on what to do. I gave them a earful for not having been open and truthful about what was going on."

While calm should return to the movement, but still, what next after the election? Members and observers wonder. The rift is there, they say, although it may not be in the open at the moment. So, serious and sincere efforts must be made to mend the rift.

Senator Kamilia Ibrahim, head of the Wanita Umno legal bureau, suggests that a meeting be called among the central committee and those appointed in the short-lived reshuffle to clear misunderstandings and resolve issues.

She says some Wanita Umno veterans could be invited to the meeting as observers and give advice.

Also says a member from the Bukit Bintang division: "They should all lay their cards on the table and thrash out the problems, without sidelining the immediate agenda of winning the general election.

"They should look at the weaknesses and strengths and work on these, although this should have been done a long time ago," adds the member who is in the PR business.

Kamilia, who was made information chief to replace Datin Paduka Fatimah Suhaimi in Siti Zaharah's short-lived new line-up, however, maintains that she does not know whether there are camps.

"As far as I am concerned, I work for the party, Now that Siti Zaharah is the leader, I work with her. It was the same with Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz when she was the Wanita head.

"We will lose direction if we get bogged down by squabbles. So let's all come together and put the party first.

"We should treat the party as a place where we can all make contributions regardless of whether we get a post."

The Bukit Bintang member is also unsure of the existence of camps, although individually some of the exco members have voiced their dissatisfaction to her over Siti Zaharah's style of leadership like the alleged lack of proper planning, transparency, consultations and follow-ups.

"People used to complain about Rafidah being arrogant, brash and not sensitive enough to women's problems. So when Siti Zaharah replaced Rafidah in the last party election, people expected a change.

"But change, she says, has been very slow to come especially with regards to women's rights and problems.

"You can talk about e-commerce and all the cyber jargon until the cows come home, but many women are finding it difficult even to get basic needs.

"Many Muslim women are not getting their rights because of the discriminatory implementation of the Islamic Family Law, which Wanita Umno should urgently address.

"But this was not emphasised at the last Wanita assembly while we were made to think that it would be prior to the assembly."

As suggested by Kamilia, the Wanita Umno leadership could learn from the wisdom and experience of their elders - the Wanita Umno veterans - who were guided by the politics of give-and-take, consultations, sacrifice, devotion and sincerity in the interest of the party.

Tan Sri Aishah Ghani, who was Wanita head from 1972 to 1984, says although she welcomes the move, but "jangan badan saja bersidang, hatipun mesti bersidang" (they must not just be physically there, but their hearts must be there too).

"There must be honesty, sincerity and tolerance in solving the problems.

"They must all place the interests of the party above all else. The rift should not be allowed to deepen but to be healed," she advises.

"Avoid factions. Differences of opinions will always be there, but do not let these disrupt unity and harmony."

She says although she has not interfered in Wanita affairs and is just the permanent chairman who presides at the annual Wanita assembly, she is aware of the goings-on.

Aishah says Siti Zaharah must take a good hold of the leadership by considering all views and not just listen to a few, while the others must play their role constructively.

Another wanita veteran, Ainon Ariffin, who was a two-term Wanita exco member, says any decision made in haste would always create suspicion and

problems.

"What happened should not have happened at all in view of the general election drawing near.

"There are rules and procedures to be followed. Normally for any line-up reshuffle, there will be consultations and the matter referred to the party president or supreme council."

Ainon hopes the Wanita leadership would in future be more careful.

"While the opposition is seemingly getting stronger and louder, we can't even take care of our own household."

Regarding the rift in Wanita Umno, she says there were efforts made by some veteran members like her to make Siti Zaharah "ngam" (see eye-to-eye) with Rafidah and Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail.

But it was an exercise in futility because until now they do not seem to get along.

Some say that what has happened within Wanita Umno reflects badly not only on the movement but also on women as a whole.

"The next millennium is just around the corner, surely we want to have a better image for women," says Kamilia.

"We must be the laughing stock to the Wanita MIC, MCA and Gerakan," says a Wanita member who wishes anonymity.

"At the last Wanita assembly, Pak Lah (party vice-president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) had spoken of getting more professionals and intellectuals to join the movement.

"But how can they feel encouraged to come in when some of our leaders have not been conducting themselves professionally?"

But all said and done, the issue should still be looked at objectively. The movement should emerge wiser, stronger and united.

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