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With house in order, time for Wanita Umno to get act together

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SO it's back to status quo. The Wanita Umno line-up remains as before the shock shake-up announced on Monday.

Two days after announcing some new names, which included new Wanita State heads for Penang and Federal Territory, the movement's chief, Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, has withdrawn her decision.

It is for the good of the party, said its president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. "I gave my advice and she agreed to withdraw to close ranks and strengthen the party."

He was also magnanimous in acknowledging her "forgetting" to inform him of the changes beforehand.

Siti Zaharah had reversed the decision, he says, at a meeting with him and party secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob. She had realised the folly of the line-up and was prepared to call it off so as not to "create discontent."

The message is, therefore, crystal clear. Party unity above all else. There will be no compromise where that is concerned.

Not now when the election machinery is being revved up. The bottom-line is there is no room for mavericks, no matter how well-intentioned. Or ill-timed. Team-playing is the order of the day.

Aptly put, a Wanita member from Bukit Bintang division, says "the tradition in Umno has always been the politics of consultation. Although at the end of the day the leader has the final say."

Even for those who had "seen this coming," the reversal of Zaharah's decision must have come as yet another shock.

And even as the Supreme Council meeting was going on, on Wednesday night, those appointed to the short-lived new line-up had gathered at Siti Zaharah's residence where she apologised and explained to them the withdrawal.

She did not attend the meeting as she "was sick", the party president said at a Press conference.

She was, however, present at the Cabinet meeting and the launching of the National Economic Consultative Council 2 by the Prime Minister earlier in the day.

Many, who say they cannot fathom the rationale for Siti Zaharah's reshuffle, attributed her move as being ill-advised. They are relieved that the matter has been resolved, swiftly, with the intervention of the party president.

Wanita Umno deputy chief Datuk Napsiah Omar, who was one of many to hear about the reshuffle-that-did-not-take-place over television, says she is happy with the reversal.

"We should be concentrating on efforts to close ranks within Wanita Umno and to strengthen the party. We have to work hard at winning the hearts and minds of the people in ensuring victory for the Barisan government."

She would not say if she would challenge Siti Zaharah in the next party elections. "I can't, and won't think about it at the moment. There are more important things," she adds.

"We can only look at this in a positive light. That's the only thing to do. We must learn from this. We cannot afford to be territorial.

"For the sake of the Malays and the party we have to move away from territoriality. Put aside differences and work together," says Azalina Othman Said, Wanita member and legal adviser to Hawa (Women's Affairs)

Selangor.

Saying she was "so disappointed that this had to happen," Azalina says members now have to work extra hard to mend the damage done to morale within the 48 to 72 hours of "not knowing what was happening".

"I appreciate that Siti Zaharah has withdrawn the changes in view of the circumstances," says businesswoman Datuk Maznah Hamid, who could have been the new head of the economics bureau, a post which she was looking forward to helm.

"But what is more important now is how to mend the rift in Wanita Umno. Perhaps we need a post-mortem, a frank discussion on how this happened and why it happened the way it did.

"Perhaps in Siti Zaharah's opinion, she needed people whom she could work with in her team. People who would give her their full support in order to strengthen the leadership and the Wanita election machinery."

To be fair to Siti Zaharah, says Maznah, it was not easy for the Wanita chief.

"While there has been the lack of transparency and consultations on the part of her leadership, she also had to deal with the bickering and backstabbing.

"So those who have been against her should also try to put themselves in her shoes and understand her predicament and work at a compromise to resolve issues." There are no winners here, she says. "Only lessons to be learnt."

She says Siti Zaharah, on the other hand, should get to know everyone better; their strengths, expertise and influence and make full use of their qualities.

"Leadership is the art of growing people and empowerment over people. Leaders use communication, esteem, vision and enthusiasm to create wonderful people who achieve personal and organisational goals.

"The true test of leadership is the feeling people have after a conference with you," says Maznah.

The question of Siti Zaharah's timing is arguable, says another Wanita exco member who wishes anonymity but maintains that she is neutral in the issue.

Siti Zaharah, she says, saw the need to strengthen her team. "If the election is coming and you don't have a strong and supportive team to work with, wouldn't you do something? And if your information bureau is not moving, wouldn't you be doing something too?"

"Of course the initial reaction could be negative but you have to try and get things moving."

She too says that Siti Zaharah has not had the cooperation she sorely needs from some exco members. As to allegations that Siti Zaharah had appointed only "her people" to the new line-up, the member says this is not true.

"There were also people seen as supporters of the other groups in her new line-up. She had hoped that members could see that as a uniting factor."

So now the thing is not to mull over the right and wrong. What's important, say Wanita members, is to move on to the larger picture - the general election. "Women have always been able to prioritise. We will close ranks to support the president and Wanita leader, notwithstanding what happened, for the sake of the country," says Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, Wanita exco member and Umno Supreme Council member.

"The elections will unite the women and make it a formidable force."

There will be ample time for heated post-mortems later. Much much later. Now that the party president has put Wanita's house in order, it is up to all members to get their act together. Sometimes where an incident like

this is concerned, once is too often.
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