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All said and done, Puteri Umno is here to rejuvenate party image

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THE subject of Puteri Umno, it seems, is still being debated with much fervour. The subject is not entirely closed because details on this new movement whose proposal for establishment was endorsed by the Umno supreme council on Monday have not been announced.

The proposal to set up Puteri Umno is one of the most significant decisions the party has taken as Umno will now have three movements within it, in addition to Wanita Umno and Pemuda Umno.

So, it is not surprising that Umno members - men and women - are talking about it with discussions ranging from animated to very emotional.

"We have been so misrepresented by the Press," groaned a senior Wanita Umno member. She was referring to the "bad Press" Wanita Umno was getting in the wake of news of the formation of this "baby movement".

"You know, I'm a mother and I'm not so mak cik. And I know what it is to give birth to a baby. And forming Puteri Umno is just like having a baby. How can we have misgivings?

"We have always from the start been supportive of this idea," she said.

In July, Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced the formation of a new movement, Puteri Umno, to attract young professional women into Umno.

The party felt that this group was not attracted to Wanita Umno which had an "old" image about it.

Predictably, Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and women took exception to this reference of "mak cik". It was learnt that some party leaders later indicated to them that it was nothing personal and was not a deliberate attempt to make a stereotype of the movement. Some even apologised.

Still, the controversy came about regarding the form Puteri Umno would be taking and the age limit.

It is no secret that many Wanita Umno leaders disagreed with the proposal by Azalina Othman Said, the young woman behind the working paper on Puteri Umno.

It was originally suggested that the age limit be 40 years and below. But Wanita Umno supremos counter-proposed it to be 35 and below.

Proposals and counter-proposals followed, suggesting a feeling that all was not well.

But it was clear from the start that the party elders wanted Puteri Umno to be set up but were quite aware of the discomfort this was causing. It is understood that the party supreme council needed time to work out details on the structure and age limit agreeable by Wanita Umno.

Now that Puteri Umno will be on its own within the mainstream party and its leader an automatic supreme council member, Wanita Umno leaders are saying that well, you are on your own, baby.

"But that is not to say that we will not guide them. We will if Puteri Umno needs our help. After all this is all for the benefit of Umno and the Malays," said a veteran Wanita leader.

Its structure and age eligibility aside, how will Puteri Umno work? Who will be its members?

A Wanita Umno Member of Parliament felt that the movement would be attractive to women in urban areas, the section of population the party is trying to attract.

She said it would be a pity if the movement could only attract factory

workers in towns and cities because the main target are professionals who can contribute to strengthening Umno.

Debating the merits and demerits of forming another movement in the party would now be merely academic but an Umno member known to be vocal felt that his view should be put on record.

He said the fact that the party decided on the formation of Puteri Umno reflected the party`s weakness and inability to address this weakness.

"Why do we need Puteri Umno? To attract young women. So why do we need another movement to do that? Why could not Wanita Umno have done that? Because of its old unattractive image? That was the problem. But that is not the Wanita's fault...the party should take responsibility and should have done something about it.

"The fact that we need to form Puteri Umno shows that we have failed," he said.

Perhaps. Puteri Umno is here to stay. Whether or not there are excited young women out there who are dying to join the movement remains to be seen.

Wanita Umno has never been against the setting up of this movement. It is easy to read Wanita Umno's earlier reaction to this proposal as a sense of insecurity on their part. Say that to a Wanita leader or an ordinary member and you'll know why the men don't mess with them. Trust me. I have seen how the (Umno) men talk to them. With much deference and not because they are old.

"They have contributed so much. The party owes it to the Wanita for all that we have achieved," said a young Umno member.

A Wanita leader said that Umno was democratic and democracy called for debate and criticisms too. "That was what we did...just gave our views on how best Puteri Umno can exist."

The party is confident that the establishment of Puteri Umno will bring benefits to Umno. Many Wanita Umno leaders are too even if some have been hurt by all that has happened.

"Of course we want to see it work," said a veteran Wanita Umno member. "We are after all, family."

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