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Different personalities to the fore

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DATUK Seri Rafidah Aziz can very well be Umno's Wanita Melayu Terakhir if one were to go by a reason put forth by a member of the party of why she is not qualified to lead the movement.

"She is not wearing the tudung (headscarf). It is important now when we are facing the resurgence of Pas which seems to have captured Malay minds with its Islamic representation," a Wanita Umno member said about why she was reluctant to cast her vote for Rafidah who is vying for the movement's top post.

Her aspersion on Rafidah uncannily reminds one of the critically-acclaimed movie entitled Wanita Melayu Terakhir.

The movie was an attempt by a local producer to discuss the complex subject of Malays and Islam. One of the points raised was a woman questioning if she was less a Muslim just because she did not wear the tudung.

However, the tudung is definitely one of the more trivial issues raised by some Wanita Umno members who support incumbent chief Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman.

Actually, the more stark difference between them is their different personalities.

Rafidah is aggressive while Zaharah is not.

Of course, such traits will be defined differently by supporters from the opposing camps.

Supporters of Zaharah will describe Rafidah as loud and unfeminine.

On the other hand, Rafidah's supporters will describe Zaharah as uninspiring.

In terms of academic achievements, both have impressive backgrounds.

Rafidah is an economics graduate who used to lecture at Universiti Malaya before getting involved in politics.

Zaharah, on the other hand, has a PhD and had a lot of academic grounding in psychology.

Since both are almost even in academic circles and only six years separates them, Rafidah, 57, and Zaharah, 51, are actually on equal footing as they enter the ring if one were to use the "tale of the tape".

If that is the case, then what else would be the consideration for the Wanita members to use to make their choice?

Of course, in terms of leadership experience, Rafidah has the edge over Zaharah.

She became the deputy Wanita chief in 1980 before taking over the movement's top post in 1982.

Zaharah only became a Wanita executive council member in 1984 and she was actually roped in by Rafidah.

When Zaharah joined then, it was said that many, including Rafidah, were impressed with her articulation of ideas, especially on economic issues.

Between Rafidah and Zaharah, the experience in politics the former had over the latter did not seem to count in the 1996 Umno election.

Zaharah, whom not many felt was in the same league with Rafidah, won the coveted Wanita chief post by a mere 27 votes in the 1996 party election.

But that election did not count, most Rafidah's supporters would tell you.

Their contention is that it was a proxy battle.

Before the 1996 election, Rafidah was repeatedly quoted in the media as

complaining that she was unfairly being labelled as someone who lacked grassroots support.

Much as Umno had allowed the fairer sex to have ample representation, it is still fundamentally a patriachal political party in which the men, though not involved in the selection of Wanita leaders, wield much influence.

The allegations that Rafidah had lost touch with the grassroots had some justification as she had for a fact, by 1996, outgrown the movement or rather become bigger than the movement itself.

This was pointed out by Zaharah in an interview after she won the post from Rafidah.

Asked how she intended to deal with Rafidah's looming shadow over the movement, Zaharah succinctly said that Rafidah had become so synonymous with the Wanita movement that no new leaders could emerge.

She said what she would do was to turn things the other way, meaning making Wanita Umno a strong entity, with the leaders moving forward collectively.

The question is whether Zaharah has managed to do that during these past four years since she took over the helm and if the members feel so.

While her achievements in leading the movement are still in question, Zaharah has made some bad calls of late, especially her decision to remove State Wanita leaders before last year's general election.

The move received numerous complaints leading to party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad advising her to reconsider her decision.

She finally rescinded the decision but the damage had been done.

At the same time, the leaders who were removed and later returned to their position would have an axe to grind with her and this coming party election would definitely be an opportunity for "pay back" time.

But that does not make Rafidah bridge the gap between herself and the movement and be able to come back and lead Wanita Umno into facing the tough challenges that are already in store.

If anything, since Rafidah lost, she has had little association with the movement and grew in stature as the International Trade and Industry Minister.

Zaharah, though less "impressive" on the national front, either by choice or design, had moved quietly on the ground, to strengthen her political grip.

This theory, however, does not seem to hold water, based on the way the nominations are going now as Rafidah has been receiving the bulk of it. Zaharah's supporters do not seem overly perturbed, at least not just yet, saying the nominations need not necessarily be translated into votes during voting.

Whatever it may be, in the final analysis, Rafidah will still be a Wanita Melayu Terakhir, based on her way of doing things.

Given the way Malay politics is evolving, let's not have the movement end up as the Pergerakan Wanita Melayu Terakhir for it has to be focused and not caught in too many trivial predicaments.

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