

17/05/2000

Goings-on not helping in closing ranks after general assembly

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NEWLY-elected Wanita Umno head Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz wasted no time in naming new Wanita State heads and deputies, barely 72 hours after winning the post by a 12-vote majority during the party assembly last Wednesday.

The move saw the return of several leaders who had been removed by the previous chief Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman after she had defeated Rafidah by 27 votes in the 1996 Wanita election.

Rafidah's supporters claim that the move is to strengthen the movement which had been facing various problems under Zaharah.

First, there was the issue of Rafidah's loyal supporters being sidelined. This had caused a rift in the movement which further widened last year when Zaharah dropped several exco members whom she thought were not loyal enough to her.

However, she later retracted her decision after being told to do so by Umno president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Zaharah's action made things worse for her because those dropped switched camps and began to oppose her. More problems occurred and all this finally resulted in Zaharah's defeat to Rafidah last week.

With Rafidah back in power, her first attempt to strengthen her position is by changing 10 of the 13 State leaderships and giving the top posts to her loyal supporters.

How is this development perceived at the grassroots level and more importantly, Zaharah's supporters who have been sidelined?

"Rafidah's move was too swift. At least she could have given herself a week before naming the new State heads and deputies.

"She has repeatedly said there are no camps and everyone should work together.

"But her decision clearly shows she is venting her anger towards Zaharah and her supporters," said Hamiah Khatib Awang, one of Zaharah's vocal supporters and also the former Pahang Wanita information chief.

Hamiah added that Rafidah should not have completely discarded all of Zaharah's supporters, especially in the latter's home state, Pahang.

"How could she do this if she is sincere in re-uniting the movement? Zaharah is still influential and Maznah Mazlan who replaced her as the State Wanita head does not even hold a divisional head's post. She is only a Rompin Wanita division committee member.

"This being the case, how would you expect the division heads to take orders from someone who is not from their ranks and someone whom they know is against their leader (Zaharah)?"

Another aspect, added Hamiah, is that neither Maznah nor her deputy Rosni Zahari were born in Pahang.

"This is a big issue among the grassroots. It is as if there is no one in Pahang who is capable of heading the State Wanita.

"If Rafidah did not want to appoint Zaharah, she could at least have included Zaharah's allies in the Pahang line-up. This would have helped cool down things."

A three-term Wanita exco member said Rafidah might have justifiable reasons for her action but she should explain it to the ordinary members.

"This is very important as right now it seems as if Rafidah is taking revenge against Zaharah's supporters. The members have the right to know the true reasons why Rafidah replaced 10 of the 13 State heads.

"Rafidah must be able to convince the members that what she did was for

the benefit of the movement and to strengthen Wanita Umno's status."

The exco member suggested that Rafidah make an effort to show that she had also retained several of Zaharah's supporters in the State line-up and bureaus although in lesser roles.

These include Ramlah Abas (Malacca deputy head), Sharifah Azizah Datuk Zain (Johor deputy head) and Mariani Mohd Yit (Federal Territory secretary).

Leaving all these aside, another interesting question to be asked is how does all this augur for the movement and what is the impression that it creates among those who are not party members, especially the younger generation?

"It is a colourful drama with plenty of twists and turns. Zaharah replaced 11 of the 13 State heads when she was in charge and Rafidah is now doing the same by dismissing 10 State heads. Both of them seem to be playing the same game.

"Previously Zaharah's supporters had a smooth ride but this time around, they would be feeling the heat as all their movements would be scrutinised by those belonging to Rafidah's camp," said a newly-elected Umno Youth exco member.

The exco member, who is a lawyer, said another important aspect to look at is the way Rafidah and Zaharah handled their defeats.

"This is the problem. Rafidah refused to hug or pose for pictures with Zaharah when she lost in 1996 while Zaharah was no where to be seen last Wednesday after her defeat.

"With such a scenario, how can you say that you want to work together and all that had happened in the past should be left aside. Anyone with a clear mind can see that it's all words and far from the truth."

Lastly, what is in store for Wanita Umno in the next three years?

Said an observer: "Well, the answer is very simple. It is back to the normal back-stabbing and endless gossiping plus more room to harbour ill feelings among those from the different camps.

"And in three years time, the stage would be ready for yet another struggle. The political drama would go on and on until both Rafidah and Zaharah are out of the picture and a new leader takes over the movement.

"But until then, Wanita Umno will witness more and more drama taking place, giving more room for the opposition to criticise us."

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