

11/05/2000

Making the best of a second chance

Joceline Tan

THE contest had been billed by some journalists as the "fight between the tudung and the selendang".

All afternoon, people at the PWTC walked around asking, "macam mana?" It was the question on everyone's lips as they tried to gauge how the race between Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman for the Wanita Umno leadership would go.

It was already 8.45pm when the results were announced with Rafidah slipping past incumbent Siti Zaharah with a mere 12 votes.

But neither of the two women were there, much to the disappointment of the delegates still waiting in the hall, particularly the journalists.

Only later did Rafidah arrive at the hall to cheers, hugs and kisses from her supporters. She had changed out of her red-and-white Wanita outfit into a floral baju kurung, a red selendang flung over her shoulders.

Rafidah was exuberant and as she stood on the stage holding up the hands of the other winners, someone took the selendang from her shoulders and draped it over her head, to more cheers.

The victory of Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil over Ainin Khairiyah Mohd Abbas was much more predictable. She had been the clear favourite right from the start. Nevertheless, her fingers were icy-cold hours before the results were known.

News that Rafidah had scrapped through trickled out about 6pm and a whoop went up among some journalists in the newsroom.

It did not take long for the unofficial results to reach the Wanita leaders although they had been seated up on the low stage the entire afternoon.

To Siti Zaharah's credit, she remained her usual composed and inscrutable self, barely moving a muscle, a pale, slender hand cupping her chin.

But her supporters were less skilled in holding their emotions and many looked downcast.

Rafidah's supporters, in contrast, were elated after the results were announced. One of them, normally a prim and proper lady, actually jumped up and down in her excitement.

Another, Senator Faridah Abu Hassan: "I couldn't sleep at all last night and this afternoon, I could hardly keep my eyes open. But now I am wide awake."

Although Rafidah took an early lead in the nominations race and eventually ended up with 92 nominations to Siti Zaharah's 73, by the time the campaign winded into its final week, the sentiments on the ground had swung to Siti Zaharah's favour.

Even Rafidah's close aides admitted to being worried.

"That's what we are hearing too," one of them had said last week.

But a week is a long time in politics and by the time the Umno delegates gathered at the PWTC today, Rafidah could be seen walking about in her usual brisk and confident way, a red-and-white-clad entourage trailing closely.

When the Wanita delegates streamed out of the Dewan Merdeka after the opening address by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Rafidah was thronged by enthusiastic delegates. They shook her hand, hugged, kissed her and posed for photographs with her.

The challenger grinned from one ear to the other and actually managed to look quite demure with her red selendang draped over her short hair.

But still, few had dared venture a clear-cut prediction of the top contest.

"50:50" was as far as most people would dare go.

Rafidah's supporters say now they knew she would triumph as early as last night when delegates turned up for party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's pre-council speech.

Apparently, when Rafidah walked into the hall, she was actually greeted by applause from part of the crowd and handshakes followed her all the way to her seat.

And since she was not a delegate, she did not join the rest of the Wanita delegates when they reconverged in Dewan Tun Dr Ismail to hear Siti Zaharah deliver her keynote address.

It is said that this is often the worst moment for the challenger to any top Umno post but the most important for the incumbent who has the advantage of a captive audience comprising mainly of delegates who will vote at the end of the speech.

The incumbent's keynote address is seen as the final chance for her to say her piece and say her piece Siti Zaharah did. She spoke at length on her four years at the helm, outlining the programmes and projects carried out under her leadership.

She also took a potshot at Rafidah, when she told the gathering "let's not refuse to even greet each other, pulling long faces or regard this contest as one of life-and-death".

She closed her speech with the customary appeal for forgiveness, said with utmost humility and phrased in the traditional manner. And she made what many viewed as a veiled pitch for support.

But even that was not enough to carry her over what is likely the most keenly-fought contest in this year's Umno race.

There were, however, many tense moments for the Rafidah camp. There was a definite mood change among the delegates after Siti Zaharah's speech. And of course, Rafidah's supporters must have noticed that every single one of the women present wore a tudung, an issue which Siti Zaharah's camp had capitalised throughout the campaign.

And Umno women being who they are always soften in the face of humility and tradition.

A delegate from Penang said: "The last part (asking for forgiveness) affected a lot of people."

Rafidah's victory must be sweet but it should not lull her into ignoring the urgent need to reconsolidate the movement which has been split from the day Siti Zaharah took over in 1996.

In fact, that should be her first task as the new Wanita leader - to include rather than exclude those who had supported Siti Zaharah, especially those who are capable and diligent.

She should also try to avoid what Siti Zaharah did, that is, consult only those who support her.

Instead, said outgoing deputy Wanita head Datuk Napsiah Omar, she must try to be the leader of the entire Wanita movement rather than the leader of only those who support her in the movement.

"She must have the bigness of heart," said Napsiah.

Only then can she carry out the larger agenda of Wanita Umno. And it is a daunting agenda given the challenge before Umno.

Wanita has always enjoyed a reputation as the backbone of Umno. Rafidah will have to be a different Rafidah. Some say she is already a little different from the Rafidah of old - a little softer, more approachable, more willing to joke and laugh instead of all business and fact. All this

while maintaining her super-efficient image as a minister.

She must realise by now that the Umno grassroots still want a mix of the traditional and the modern, someone whom they can relate to, yet is capable of looking beyond the horizon.

And given the way which the tudung issue nearly cost her this contest, she will have to seriously look into the question of Islam and women in Umno.

It is not often that people get the kind of second chance that Rafidah won yesterday and many Wanita delegates said they hope she will not regard it casually.

"She must try very, very hard," said Napsiah.

(END)