

12/05/2000

New Wanita leader must help close ranks and consolidate movement

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OVERHEARD in the PWTC's Dewan Tun Dr Ismail on Wednesday night after the Wanita Umno election results were announced, were some voices of doubt whether Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz would now be more sensitive and concerned about women's issues.

"Let's give her another chance," said one of the delegates amidst the din with the just elected Wanita chief about to deliver her victory speech. "We will be able to see even in a year," the delegate added.

The victor and the vanquished were not seen on stage together when the results were announced this time, although one remembers an upset Rafidah not demonstrating graciousness in defeat the last time.

The results must be a bitter pill to swallow for Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman and her supporters.

But the writing was on the wall, especially for those who have been following the movement closely after Siti Zaharah took over the helm with renewed hope for Malaysian women, particularly Malay women.

It did not take much to know how divided Wanita Umno was under Siti Zaharah's leadership, that even some of her once staunch supporters started turning against her, and threw their weight behind Rafidah this time.

The festering rift deepened last year when Siti Zaharah reshuffled the Wanita line-up that was soon aborted on the advice of party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Despite a heart-to-heart meeting between Siti Zaharah and her exco members (in the presence of party secretary-general Tan Sr Khalil Yaakob) to mend the rift, it was far from over.

Khalil's advice for them to come out of that meeting to "speak in one voice and one tone" (satu suara, satu nada) was immediately swept aside once outside the meeting room.

A State Wanita leader admitted to this writer of once being a Rafidah supporter but campaigned relentlessly for Siti Zaharah in the 1996 party elections.

"Although Rafidah excelled as a minister and in the international arena, I was disappointed that she was was not sensitive to women's problems and concerns.

"I thought Siti Zaharah would be more sensitive and could do something for women," said the State Wanita leader, who unlike some of her Wanita counterparts, omitted the fact that former party deputy president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's influence then, also had a hand in ensuring Siti Zaharah's victory.

"Not only had she not come out with concrete programmes for women, but the exco had also become so divisive under her leadership," said the State Wanita leader.

"What she should have done after taking over the leadership, was to consolidate by closing ranks," she added.

However, Siti Zaharah's removal of some exco members (who were seen as Rafidah's supporters) as bureau heads although they had the capabilities and qualifications to handle such responsibility, alienated them further.

It was also as clear as daylight to everyone that her No 2, Datuk Napsiah Omar who had aligned with her in the 1996 election, was sidelined as most of her posts and responsibilities given to her under Rafidah, were taken away.

And this writer often got an earful from some of the exco members about their unhappiness over Siti Zaharah's style of leadership.

One could see that Siti Zaharah lacked political savvy to ensure her continued leadership for at least another term or two.

Former Wanita leaders Tan Sri Fatimah Hashim and Tan Sri Aishah Ghani had served much longer terms as Wanita chief as well as Rafidah (for 12 years) before she was defeated by Siti Zaharah in the 1996 election.

Siti Zaharah is also said to have been ill-advised by her advisers in her moves.

She, however, does not possess the brashness and impatience of Rafidah and her Malay feminine traits must have gone down well with the grassroots women.

That perhaps explains her losing to Rafidah by only 12 votes, while her wearing the tudung might also have scored her points.

Let's hope Rafidah does not repeat Siti Zaharah's mistakes and her own old mistakes.

Her immediate task will be to see that the movement closes ranks.

But Rafidah's supporters have insisted that the firebrand has toned down and mellowed since her defeat to Siti Zaharah in the last election and especially after becoming a grandmother.

It is said that she has been attending even "small" functions and appears to be more sensitive and concerned about women's issues.

Two former male journalists who were travelling with me to the PWTC chatted that in terms of calibre and intelligence, "no one in Umno Youth can match her and that very few in the Supreme Council can".

It was indeed a very warm "welcome back" for Rafidah as she walked into Dewan Tun Dr Ismail on Wednesday night when delegates surged forward, grabbed, hugged and kissed her amidst thunderous applause.

A harassed Umno headquarters official, who accompanied Rafidah into the hall, told this writer how one of Rafidah's large glittering ear-stud had dropped to the carpeted floor in the melee.

The mood was infectious as Rafidah went on stage to make her victory speech which was humble in tone and content.

As the tudung had become an issue, someone got hold of a filmy red selendang (shawl) and draped it over Rafidah's bare head before the cameras.

Rafidah spoke of the heavy work and responsibilities ahead. Yes, a lot of work indeed as women need to move ahead in all fields.

Well and good if a woman leader can speak competently on GATT, WTO, AFTA, MSC and the like. But what good is it to the ordinary women at large, many of whom are finding it difficult even to keep body and soul together, if their plight is not getting due attention?

There are women living in pockets of poverty, especially indigenous women, who are often left out of mainstream development.

And don't forget that there are some 600,000 single mothers in the country whose problems need to be looked into.

Besides, there are still laws, policies and practices that discriminate against women in subtle forms or otherwise.

Despite the existence of the Domestic Violence Act, women continue to be victims of such violence and many still find it difficult to get legal redress because it is still considered a family matter, while the procedures do not make it easy for women to get redress.

And for Muslim women, the poor implementation and enforcement of Islamic Family Law has made it difficult for them to get out of an abusive marriage.

Indeed, the poor implementation and enforcement of this law and negative attitude of religious officials have for long been a bone of contention

for Muslim women.

In the past, some of the affected women had personally brought up their cases with Wanita Umno but to no avail.

The higher religious authorities seem to have turned a deaf ear. Their standard answer is often "women don't know their rights".

But this argument no longer holds water for there are various organisations and even government agencies which have been educating women on their rights. Women largely know their rights, but it's just they are not getting some of these rights.

There is still a lack of women's representation in Parliament, Senate, State Legislature and in the local authorities, besides in the top political party hierarchy and Cabinet.

These are only some of the areas where Wanita Umno has to prove that they can act as an effective pressure group in bringing about the desired change.

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