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Rafidah: A Woman of Grit

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AND so another election soon, the real election as many people say; the Umno presidential election on May 11. There is truth in the argument that we shape our environment, including that of the political environment. If Wanita Umno members wish it so, they can, like the farmers in our kampungs, reduce the use of chemicals and allow the "daughters of the New Policy Economic revolution" and the songbirds to return.

Ask any Malaysian about Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and, at worst you get an unambiguous "aduh, menteri perempuan itu (ugh, that woman minister)" and at best "cekap tetapi (able but) ..." Others moan like a rushing sound as of wind in the trees.

When I asked several passengers on the light rail transit from Masjid Jamek to KLCC what they thought of Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, most of them looked blank. But with some prodding, their memories seemed to come back. "The woman who beat Rafidah Aziz (three years ago)" and "one of the several women ministers" were the responses. Somehow, Datuk Shahrizat Jalil, a deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Department, is even better known than Dr Zaharah.

If I were advising Dr Zaharah, I would urge her to get a good spin doctor real fast. She appears to me - right now - like the Millennium Dome in Greenwich, London, which is not attracting the crowds, but a revamped management might just increase the popularity of the STG758 million (STG1 = RM6.05) British showcase project.

I am happy Datuk Napsiah Omar has decided not to go for the Wanita chief's post because her chance of winning is as good as me becoming the Menteri Besar of Kelantan. She is after all a realist and should concentrate on defending her No. 2 position against a contemporary and well-groomed Shahrizat.

Dr Zaharah and Rafidah are in a "do-or-die return match" on May 10. Rafidah must win to force a "rubber set" in 2003, having been ousted from her long-held position as Wanita chief for - what seemed to most - "stubbornly refusing to adjust to changing political and new cultural realities".

But, the truth was more than that. There was "a labyrinthine proxy fight of sorts" and Dr Zaharah and her "godfather" triumphed. With the benefit of hindsight, the victory turned out to be pyrrhic. Like three years ago, wave goodbye to that fantasy of a more inclusive Wanita Umno. The rematch doesn't mean Wanita Umno delegates love Rafidah more or Dr Zaharah less.

Datuk Zahid Hamidi, the former Umno Youth chief, has recanted. Now that he is out of fool's paradise, I am glad he has gone back to school.

Rafidah is the longest serving woman minister, one of the frontbenchers in the Cabinet. She has since the early 1980s forged a more-than-acceptable political career, starting from a time when the Wanita Umno chief would only be given the junior social welfare portfolio.

Rafidah, however, went on, I believe, to head the middle-rung Ministry of Public Enterprises. It was strikingly noteworthy because it occurred when women were almost - or even universally - absent from the higher echelons of the Malaysian political landscape.

Wanita Umno has had seven chiefs and I would say Tan Sri Fatimah Hashim was one of the "greats" though she lost her job in the early 1970s to Tan Sri Aishah Ghani, a former Berita Harian journalist. Aishah, like Dr Zaharah, was "a sponsored candidate" of unseen but known forces outside

the then Wanita Umno movement. But that is another story.

Fatimah was a perceptive and an excellent leader, cleverer and held in higher esteem than her lawyer husband though she had little formal education herself.

"I am a graduate of the University of Life," she once said proudly to me. And she was. Fatimah now lives quietly in retirement, devoting herself to religious studies and doting on her many grandchildren.

I recall Fatimah with fondness and admiration for she remains a good example of a humble politician who was to prove during the Tunku Abdul Rahman administration (1955-1970) that she was strong and good enough to wield influence and power while remaining a lady.

Fatimah tutored Tan Sri Osman Aroff, the former Menteri Besar of Kedah, and Datuk Sheikh Kadir, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism, on realpolitik and civilization.

Rafidah used to deny that her gender had anything to do with who she was (and is) and what she wanted (and wants) to do or to be. Her effort to separate the expectations associated with her gender from her work is very worthy and I do hope they are not in conflict.

"Where are the women leaders?" asked Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir in her column in the Star. She moans as she pens her missive, "I griped that the women leaders we had never did much for women. In fact in some cases, they were defensive about being women, that somehow they wanted everyone to overlook the fact that they were female because they thought it was to their disadvantage to draw attention to it."

Rafidah strictly cannot be an advocate for children, women's rights, welfare, medicare and the rights of single parents while constantly protesting she is no feminist. But right or wrong, Rafidah is a fighter. I am happy to read she had gathered women politicians to bring them closer with the Government and its agencies to ensure "greater and further development for women".

That was a political coup. In politics, as in war and love, everything is fair. I know both Rafidah and Dr Zaharah personally, though Rafidah longer and better. Rafidah achieved success via the Senate, while Dr Zaharah went straight into the Dewan Rakyat. Rafidah and Dr Zaharah are both well educated, happily married and have stable families.

For all of her denials of the importance of her womanhood, Rafidah must remember that her strongest political base is women, Wanita Umno, whom she is out to charm and seduce during the run-up to the May 10 poll.

Rafidah has a reputation as a person who speaks her mind, a habit which sometimes causes offence. I know it is hard for her. It is difficult to keep silent when you see inefficiency and waste being perpetuated around you. Rafidah also does not suffer fools gladly. Her acid tongue is feared; many just avoid her because she can often be utterly callous.

People do strive, where possible, to keep a civil tongue in one's head, don't they? How I wish sometimes I can hold back, be less straight forward, and accept that perhaps discretion is the better part of valour. Still, the most important thing is result and Rafidah does perform well in her ministry.

I lasted 14 years as Tun Abdul Razak Hussein's aide until his death because he valued results, which I would say I always delivered. Both friends and foes would confirm that.

I do not know Rafidah well enough to find a human story in her long political career. I knew her late father, Abdul Aziz, a junior civil servant, better. Perhaps, for a start, besides playing golf, Rafidah should also try to learn to make light social conversation, avoid talkathons and not always be in a state of denial.

Certainly, there is very little which has not been said about her. She

remains controversial and explaining her is not easy. Rafidah is, whether one likes it or not, a changeable personality of a figure who is arguably the most able woman minister in the Malaysian political annals.

Rafidah is, for sure, a hard act for another woman minister to follow. Wanita Umno this day requires someone experienced, well-tested and as hardworking as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammad himself. Because of that, they need a leader of great grit and determination to face new challenges in the first decade of the new millennium.

Wanita Umno delegates have time to ponder and it will mirror their own limitations if they fail to distinguish what is fat on campaigning, thin on political and moral profundity (using the most complex idioms and vagueness to tell or explain the simplest things); and what is of real value and substantive to them, Umno and to the nation.

Rafidah would have learned her lessons and past omissions well. At the beginning of this new century, those who do not value ability for its own sake rather than for its comforts, are unlikely to be talented themselves, and definitely lacking in vision and insight.

There is not much in the way of change that can be perceived on the horizon unless Wanita Umno realises that it is, like Britain's Health Service, sick itself.

In my 42 years of active involvement in Umno politics, I have never seen until now how dismal Wanita Umno's performance and contributions are at the highest political level. It is high time it met the demands and expectations of a modernising Malay society.

What is relevant, and I agree entirely with Marina is that Malaysia needs " ... true women leaders, women who are in tune with the needs of women, who are courageous enough to challenge injustices when they see them, who are original and creative and who conduct themselves with humility and good humour, and who think of political office as simply a means to do good and not an end in itself".

Malaysia does not need run-of-the mill or average characters as its leaders. What is needed, and urgently, are genuine, bold, principled, uncallous and profound women leaders.

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