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Siti Zaharah, Rafidah are the front-runners for Wanita top post

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A THREE-CORNERED fight for the post of Wanita Umno chief in the party elections seems a possibility at the moment.

However, many within Wanita are confident that it will eventually be a straight fight between incumbent Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman and former chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz.

Siti Zaharah has declared that she would defend her post. Current deputy chief Datuk Napsiah Omar has announced that she would challenge her, while Rafidah has sent signals that she is making a comeback.

"From the Press statements given by them so far, it looks like it's going to be a three-cornered fight, but eventually, it will be between Zaharah and Rafidah," says a well-connected Wanita State leader.

"The chances are 50-50, but who wins will be determined by last minute factors and who makes the least blunders, if any."

She says even if Napsiah decides to contest, the focus will still be on Zaharah and Rafidah as they are the only two women Ministers, while Napsiah holds no ministerial or State executive council post.

"Our aim is to change the Wanita leadership, but there won't be a three-cornered fight. We are positive of that," reveals a Wanita exco member, claiming the "we" referred to more than half of the exco. She claims they are unhappy with Siti Zaharah's leadership and want her replaced.

"If there's anyone who can bring back unity and stability to Wanita Umno now, it is Rafidah.

"How can Wanita Umno influence policy and decision-making whether at party level or on women's issues nationally, if the present leaders are at logger-heads?"

The exco member was referring to the split within the Wanita exco, which deepened when Siti Zaharah reshuffled the line-up with some names dropped last year. She later rescinded the move on the directive of party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Although the problems were said to be resolved after a heart-to-heart meeting of the Wanita exco and those affected by the aborted reshuffle, it is clear as daylight that the rift remains.

It is no secret that Napsiah, a former Cabinet Minister and Negeri Sembilan State Executive Councillor, has been marginalised within the present Wanita set-up, and she certainly wants a change of leadership.

However, some Wanita exco and State leaders are confident that Napsiah, being the pragmatic and practical person she is, will make way for Rafidah if her reading is clear that Rafidah could win.

Napsiah had a cordial relationship when she was deputy to Rafidah although she was disheartened when Rafidah backed Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail for the deputy's post in the last election. She then aligned herself with Siti Zaharah.

"Still, these are two people (Rafidah and Napsiah) who can set aside personal differences in the interest of the party," says the exco member.

Napsiah, who is now in London visiting her daughter, is also said to have told her supporters who saw her off at the airport that if "Kak Long" (elder sister - Rafidah) goes for No. 1, we can discuss that Kak Ngah (younger sister - Napsiah) goes for No.2".

It may be a futile fight for Napsiah, for the thinking of the grass roots women is over how she could effectively look into their problems when she holds no position of power.

"We love her as she is warm, endearing, motherly and down-to-earth, but that's the reality in politics. It is difficult for one to make a challenge for a top party post if he or she holds no important position," says a Negeri Sembilan Wanita Umno member.

And then again, Rafidah may not want a non-Minister to be her number two in the Wanita line-up.

One Wanita Umno veteran says she can understand why Rafidah declined a proposal that she contest for the party vice-president's post, saying it should be left to the men although some quarters like the Perak Umno had voiced their support for her.

"You don't understand the male mentality. While they say they admire her dynamism and intelligence, when it comes to such a party post, they would inevitably vote for the men.

"The performance of the women candidates for the party Supreme Council seats in past elections tells you how difficult it is for women to be accepted for high positions within the party."

Should there be a straight fight between Zaharah and Rafidah, both have their track records and strengths and weaknesses to be considered by the delegates.

Being the Wanita Umno head, Zaharah has her band of supporters. She recently announced that five State leaders and some divisions had expressed their support for her to defend her post.

But Rafidah has also got back into the good books of many as she has mellowed since she lost to Siti Zaharah in the 1996 party elections and also after becoming a grandmother.

She must have done some soul-searching after her defeat, say some Wanita observers. Her abrasiveness and impatience for things she considered remeh-temeh (trivial) and her expectation that every woman be tough like her was well-known.

"She has never been a feminist, but we can see now that she is trying to be more sensitive to women's issues," says one Wanita observer.

Having good human relations is a valued trait in Malay culture, but it must be balanced by capabilities, dynamism and leadership qualities, says a Wanita Umno veteran.

Although Wanita exco member Datuk Shahrizat Jalil has not indicated she would go for the number two post, it is said that she may come in at the last minute.

"Shahrizat is a cautious politician. She is not making any move yet, and is studying the developments and gauging sentiments. That's her style. She may also want to get the cue from the top," says a Wanita Umno State leader.

Some feel Shahrizat stands a good chance as she is Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of women's affairs.

Ultimately, it is for the delegates to assess wisely who can serve them "best" in terms of experience, expertise, maturity and managing issues and people for the long-term good of Wanita Umno and the party.