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Umno Youth, Wanita movements elect leaders today

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THE 54th Umno general assembly kicks off today with the Youth and Wanita joint assemblies, with attention being focused on the women's wing where incumbent Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman faces Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz in a leadership challenge.

Youth head Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, who is also Youth and Sports Minister, has retained his post uncontested.

Siti Zaharah, who is also National Unity and Social Development Minister, had wrested the Wanita chief post from Rafidah during the Umno election in 1996 by 27 votes. Siti Zaharah had polled 271 votes against Rafidah's 244.

Rafidah had held the post for 12 years since 1984 before she was challenged by Siti Zaharah.

The 673 delegates to the Wanita assembly will elect a deputy permanent chairman, the chief and her deputy and 15 exco members. Tan Sri Aishah Ghani won uncontested for the post of permanent chairman.

Three are vying for the deputy permanent chairman post including incumbent Sharifah Aminah Syed Ahmad, Wanita chief (two including incumbent Siti Zaharah), deputy chief (two) and 44 are contesting for 15 exco seats.

Rafidah, who is also International Trade and Industry Minister, arrived at a pre-council briefing in Kuala Lumpur yesterday accompanied by some of her supporters and Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil.

Shahrizat, who is also Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, is contesting against Ainin Khairiyah Abbas for the deputy chief post.

Zaharah, meanwhile, was seen at the entrance of the hall welcoming and shaking hands with delegates as they walked in.

The closed-door briefing for Umno leaders and delegates was by Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Among those contesting for Wanita exco are two parliamentary secretaries namely Dr Robia Kosai (Land and Cooperative Development Ministry) and Kamsiyah Yeop (Prime Minister's Department), four senators (Datuk Hazizah Sultan, Melati Ali, Faezah Abu Kassin and Kamilia Ibrahim), businesswoman Datuk Maznah Abdul Hamid and lawyer Illani Ishak.

Each Umno division can send four delegates to the assembly. The division chiefs and their deputies are automatic delegates, while the other two are nominated by division members.

Over at Umno Youth, a total of 666 delegates will attend the meeting and vote for the Umno Youth Exco, regarded as the training ground for future Umno leaders.

With the top post seeing no contest, attention has shifted to the deputy Youth head seat which will see a straight fight between Datuk Abdul Aziz Sheikh Fadzir and Zein Isma Ismail.

Abdul Aziz, a businessman, is tipped as the favourite based on the 124 nominations he received against Zein Isma's 29.

A total of 61 candidates are vying for 19 posts in the Umno Youth election. Three, including incumbent Deputy Information Minister Datuk Khalid Yunus, are contesting for the post of permanent chairman. A total of 53 candidates are contesting for 15 seats as Umno Youth Exco members.

Very little surprises are expected from the Youth wing. Observers say with Hishammuddin still Umno Youth head, the movement's members should face

no difficulties closing ranks after the elections.
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