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Wanita Umno should embrace Puteri wing, not feel threatened by it

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WHENEVER someone sets out to perform a herculean task of which the outcome is uncertain, he is usually criticised, ridiculed or questioned.

In this case, the setting up of Puteri Umno to attract younger women to the party by any measure is daunting but one that the party leadership, specifically Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, is determined to see through.

The idea for such a movement came from him when, after chairing the supreme council meeting in July, he announced that Umno would set up a new wing, Pasukan Puteri Umno, an equivalent of Umno Youth.

The aim is simple - to cater to young women who are interested in joining the party, but are uncomfortable with the existing structure of Wanita Umno which they perceive as being, well, old.

And so one could literally hear the rumblings from within Wanita Umno.

Soon after the announcement, Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz responded by laying down the movement's own idea of what this new wing should be.

She said Wanita Umno did not want Puteri Umno to be an entity like the Umno Youth as it had to be part of Wanita Umno. And, it will exist as a club.

Rafidah made it clear that Wanita Umno is not against the idea of setting up an organisation of young Malay women who can contribute immensely to Umno and the country. In fact, she said, the movement was all for it.

She defended the movement's stand, saying that a formal structure empowering Putri Umno as a separate women's movement was not feasible as this would mean additional candidacy, elections and so forth that could cause disunity.

This almost immediately sparked criticisms and disenchantment from enthusiastic young and not-so-young women who were already inspired by Dr Mahathir's announcement.

They could not believe that a well-respected leader like Rafidah could come out with only a "club" status for young Malay women. They were disappointed. Surely they deserve more than that.

Having read what Wanita Umno head had to say, one cannot help but feel that there are elements of fear and insecurity within the Wanita ranks.

Dr Mahathir's statement had earlier caused ripples of excitement as many saw this as a proactive effort by the top party leadership to address the problem plaguing Umno - a lack of interest and indifference among young Malay women to join the party.

There were elated voices saying: "Well, it's about time. After all, why should there not be a youth wing in Umno for the other half of the young Malay population as well?"

Consider the fact that out of the party's current 2,819,088 members, 1,284,862 are women. There are 743,944 Umno Youth members and 790,284 male members above 40.

After much debate, Wanita Umno on Monday finally agreed to the formation of Puteri Umno but made a specific outline of what the structure should be.

The movement would propose to the party supreme council that membership of Puteri Umno be confined to those aged 25 and below, instead of 40 and below as earlier suggested. Rafidah said the lower age limit would reflect

the young people's image associated with the body.

It is good that Wanita Umno has realised the importance of the wing to rejuvenate Umno and to attract those who make up almost 1.9 million of the population - Malay women between the ages of 18 and 39. By now, the Wanita movement should realise that the missing link in Umno is the participation of younger women (and men), among whom are many professionals.

Unlike Umno Youth whose representation in age groups is varied, Wanita is heavy on the older generation.

It should not feel that its position (in the party) will be threatened by having Puteri Umno as a separate entity.

Why should it feel that Puteri Umno will create disunity within the party?

Wanita Umno should instead openly embrace the idea and find the proposal refreshing as this will be truly engaging young Malay women and reinforce the party's relevance in representing the cross-section of the society.

But will a Puteri Umno under the Wanita wing be frustrating for these young, enthusiastic women whose independence and freedom will be stifled?

Their "seniors" will undoubtedly interfere with policy decisions made by these "inexperienced" Puteri leaders.

It is interesting to see how the role of the young Malay women politicians will turn out to be. Will they be relegated to a much smaller role although they are free to function on their own, organising activities suitable for their age group?

No doubt, they should be given proper guidance because they will be the future leaders of the country, but one must not forget that they have certain ideas and ideals on how to improve society, the people and the country.

Another matter to consider perhaps, is the age group as proposed by the movement which is confined to those aged 25 and below which may not seem viable for their presence would not be felt although at one end, this move will increase membership in Umno.

If they join the party at the age of 18, they are still considered green in politics and cannot contribute much to the party.

However if the age group is increased to 35 years and below, then the party will see a more mature and able group of women contributing to it.

What is reassuring is that the new wing will most certainly increase Umno's credibility, with the hope of fresh new faces, fresh ideas and a fresh start for the party which, like it or not, must address the new waves of change that call for the voice of a young population.

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