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Youth, Wanita wings convene under the harsh spotlight of public scrutiny

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UMNO'S continued struggle as the dominant political force in the country is being deeply analysed in the next few days. In fact, the nature by which the party is going to proceed with its perjuangan yang belum selesai (unfinished struggle) will be further detailed at its annual general assembly beginning Thursday.

As usual, the assembly proper will be preceded by the one-day assembly of the party's Youth and Wanita wings, themselves undergoing some serious soul-searching process. This year, the highlight of both gatherings is the contest for the head of the Wanita movement, a renewed battle between previous title-holder Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and incumbent Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman.

(Rafidah, at the helm for four terms, lost to Siti Zaharah at the 1996 contest by 27 votes. She is now attempting a comeback, having secured 93 nominations as against 72 for Siti Zaharah.)

At the Youth camp, Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein is safe and secure as the undisputed chief, having won the post uncontested. Having served as the deputy to previous head Datuk Zahid Hamidi, Hishammuddin, son of third Prime Minister Tun Hussein Onn, appeared poised to lead the movement to ride out the challenges in the new millennium.

In meeting the members' aspirations and in wanting to make itself relevant always, Hishammuddin may have to re-invent Umno Youth and remove the stigma that it is nothing more than an echo-sounding board of its parent body.

Wanita Umno, too, has a somewhat similar agenda, though it may have a more difficult task at hand. The movement has to put its house in order before it can embark on any serious and meaningful undertaking to contribute to Umno's perjuangan. Once that is done, then Wanita Umno, no less an integral part of the 54-year-old party, can concentrate on more substantial party issues rather than endlessly trying to convince itself as a serious forum to resolve national issues.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, vice-president whose elevation as deputy president will be officially endorsed before the week is over, will address the gathering of Youth and Wanita delegates today. Abdullah, understudying Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as party president and Prime Minister, is expected to lay the groundwork for the assembly proper. Hence, Abdullah's speech is also important and he could very well hint of the bigger agenda which is expected to be outlined by Dr Mahathir on Thursday.

The rhetoric aside (hopefully Abdullah will speak directly and plainly, as a communicator rather than as someone trying to impress the gallery with new words and terms), Abdullah must address some of the problems affecting the party. Allegations of money politics and abuse of power, rivalries among leaders whenever there is a party election, the historical perspectives of the party and its impact on Youth and Wanita and more importantly, the complete understanding among second and third-echelon leaders of the party's struggle.

Any deviation from the struggle would render the movements ineffective and could lead to the eventual destruction of the main body. No single party, not even the highly successful Umno, has the divine right to perpetual rule and control of the nation. There are enough world examples of that.

Abdullah, whose hard work had seen success at the Sabah polls on March 12 and 13, 1999, and more recently, the Sanggang by-election in Pahang, is well-placed to give his input on the Nov 29 general election. He may particularly want Youth and Wanita delegates to be more focused in their political work, to reach out more systematically, to be more voter-friendly, to be involved and be seen to be more involved with the masses.

In dealing with this issue, Abdullah may well advise Youth and Wanita leaders and members to truly play the role of the party's eyes and ears on the everyday life of the people. Umno and Wanita leaders who prefer to adopt "selective listening" approaches must be made to realise that not only would their political career be put on the line, but may actually jeopardise the party's survival in the long run.

In fact, survival should be the buzzword in Abdullah's address. If the Youth and Wanita wings fail to ensure the continued struggle of the party and what it stands for, then Umno's future, which is tied to the future of the Bumiputeras, may be severely compromised. Hidup Melayu may be a forgotten slogan, replaced by narrow, selfish and materialistic personal cry of Hidup Aku.

This year's Youth and Wanita assemblies must also unearth credible, performance-driven leaders, those who genuinely believe in the cause, those whose commitment can be relied upon through thick and thin. New talents must be discovered and nurtured. A proper membership drive must be initiated and applications for membership be given due courtesy and respect.

The tasks at hand for the two wings are plenty. Winning the hearts and minds of Bumiputera fence-sitters cannot be done overnight or by headline-grabbing campaigns short on substance but long on cheap publicity. As examples, what has happened to the Youth's service centre (seen as a pale duplicate of the MCA service bureau)? Will we see a Wanita wing being an effective rallying point for troubled single parents? Can we see a combined Youth and Wanita project aimed at overcoming the drug menace, tackling the squatter issue, promoting a healthy lifestyle and defending the environment from greedy, unscrupulous businessmen?

In the area of religion, Youth and Wanita Umno have a challenge that tests their ability to articulate the fine prints of Islam's interpretation on contemporary issues such as justice, fair play, ethical business dealings, leadership and daily living in a plural society such as ours. Can the two wings produce credible leaders well prepared with deep Islamic knowledge who can give a run for their money to Pas' crowd pullers who exploit Islam for their political mileage?

At the end of the day, will the young Malay masses see an Umno Youth and Wanita that are fresh with creative, workable ideas to strengthen the party? Will the two movements emerge as a credible vehicle to push the Malay agenda further and advance the national cry for a Bangsa Malaysia that is resilient, resourceful and successful?

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