

Azalina takes Puteri Umno job in her stride

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WHEN Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced her appointment as chief of Puteri Umno during the supreme council meeting on Saturday, Azalina Othman was missing from the room.

She was in the ladies.

Returning to the meeting, she was puzzled as to why the members were giving her "the look".

Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim then whispered and broke the news to her.

At her office the next day at the Umno Civil Action Bureau in Kelana Jaya, Azalina was busy going through one interview after another.

She is, after all, the *belle du jour* despite having been regularly featured in the media over the past year since being appointed a supreme council member and head of the bureau.

Was she surprised over her appointment in Puteri Umno?

"I would say it was (a surprise) because to the very end no one knew. According to the procedure, the supreme council has to vote on it.

"Shahidan congratulated me and told me that three names were mentioned and they chose me.

"I have said many times that I want to go out there and find potential young Malay women to lead.

"I want to train you (prospective leaders) and send you out because life is short. There are bigger things that Umno has to deal with.

"There are more than one million young Malay women between 18 and 35 years old out there for me to train and choose from. Surely they have

Being the first head of Puteri Umno is no daunting task for Azalina Othman. As she tells MERGAWATI ZULFAKAR and SA'ODAH ELIAS, her main concern is to scout for potential young women leaders and get things going.

potential.

"Some are mothers and wives who, at the same time, hold senior managerial posts. Some are successful businesswomen.

"Surely many of them are capable of running an organisation. They may not bother now because no one bothered to look and invite them to lead," she said.

A senior politician once told Azalina that she might be buried in her own idealism.

"I am being positive and many people think I am crazy. But I don't mind.

"I believe that at the end of the day, I had tried — rather than *peluk tubuh* (be an armchair critic) like a lot of people who complain that this or that is not right; complain about women's issues and expect the authorities to do things."

Insisting that Puteri Umno should not be seen as a threat to Wanita Umno, she said:

"I am not in competition. I am just complementing the existing leaders."

To Wanita Umno's advice that Puteri Umno should not take its members, she said:

"I am sure what they meant is 'don't actively try to take away our members but if you choose to do so, it is okay'."

She said a concerted effort would be needed to come out with programmes which can attract young women.

She said ordinary members can perform as well without holding posts.

"That is my message. My approach will be very 'NGO-ish.' I believe young women of today are mostly mothers. Puteri is for the future generation. It is for their daughters.

"They can be assured that they can continue to live in a liberal country.

"I look at 2004 and think about how Malay politics is developing; at PAS with its religious extremism and discriminatory policies against women; and at Keadilan which only uses a one-man issue.

"I don't see any other choice for women, but Umno."

Asked if she would need to change her style and image to accommodate expectations in Umno, Azalina replied: "No way."

"If they don't like me, I don't get elected, so what! It is not important because I have done what I wanted to do.

"I am an activist and has been one for the past 10 years.

"To get married with three kids, just so I can appear to be the perfect image of a woman leader — I will not change from what I am today because I know Umno is a liberal party."

Azalina said she would not actually be leading Puteri Umno but merely be its custodian for one year.

"I want to tell potential leaders that if you want change, you cannot institute change without participating in the process of change.

"That is what I want to do for one year. After that, it us

up to them (supreme council) to decide. If you choose someone else, I will be more than happy."

Azalina said she had the support of some state liaison chairmen as well as Youth and Wanita Umno leaders.

"It is not like Puteri is going to survive alone. Umno members, regardless of what people say, will always be together."

On the criteria to be Umno leaders, Azalina said that apart from being Malays, they have to be nationalistic.

"Other qualities can be trained. As nationalists they must be able to understand the people, their followers and what is needed to make the Puteri voice heard.

"They must be creative with programmes because Puteri comes into existence in an era of globalisation and k-economy.

"We are talking about a different breed of young Malay women — independent, secure but at the same time still preserving traditional values."

Azalina hoped to make Puteri a success through activi-

ties in the areas of services, education and health.

"I am talking about women as the catalyst of change. Women as the agent to national unity.

"Even in Barisan Nasional — take Wanita MCA for instance — their young members are well groomed. I really envy them. Maybe that is my job, basically working as a talent scout."

Azalina said she would get the names of her pro tem committee members from the party headquarters and call for a meeting with them soon.

"Right now I don't even know who they are.

"It is important to meet them as soon as possible so that we can work on things," she added.

Asked if she felt intimidated by the responsibility (of being Umno Puteri chief) she said: "The only thing I fear is God and my father.

"The point is, why should I feel intimidated when I know that I am doing something right, something that I sincerely believe in?" she asked.