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Puteri with a mission

Dazman Manan

THE past few days have been hectic for Azalina Othman Said since Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced her appointment as the first Puteri Umno chief last Saturday.

In fact, this interview was delayed and interrupted several times.

Her small and simple office overlooking Pusat Bandar Damansara is decked with a big congratulatory bouquet of purple and pink flowers brought in by her secretary Haryani who earlier on whispered, "She hates flowers and they have never stopped coming since that (important) day."

"I really don't know what to do with them," says Azalina, putting aside the fragrant blossoms, which apparently came from Singapore.

In this new position the lawyer and appointed member of the Umno supreme council now sees herself in the business of selling and marketing.

"I'm planning a strategy where I'd go out there, market a product, sell it and scout for potential talents.

"The one thing I learnt during formal or informal meetings with people since my appointment is the fact that if you want people to care for you, you have to care for them," she says.

Azalina adds that to encourage young women to join Puteri Umno and to care for the continuity of Umno, she would give Puteri Umno members every right to see where the party is going in years to come.

"It is not going to be a unilateral but a bilateral relationship because politics is about the art of people and when you join politics you can't say you join because of position."

Her first assignment would be to call for a meeting with her pro-team committee members.

"First, I have to get to know them and find out what the scenario is like in their constituencies. To me, this is like the birth of a new baby girl. I have to start everything from the ground level."

Speaking at her office in the legal firm where she is a partner, the 37-year-old says she has been getting many calls from young women wanting to join Puteri Umno.

"It's really amazing and their voices tell me that they are young and knowledgable. They're not the typical politician types. They are a group of young women who want to contribute and I can feel it is going to be exciting," she explains.

Azalina stresses that those who wish to join Puteri Umno should not expect anything out of it. Instead, aspiring members must have the drive and spirit to contribute towards the betterment of women such as in education and health.

"I'd rather have quality supporters than a huge number of followers who don't function.

"Puteri Umno is about politics with conscience. Its members are part of the people. Puteri does not direct the people, it's the other way around," she says, adding that she's thinking of the theme Generasi Wanita Prihatin for Puteri Umno.

To encourage young women to participate in politics, she says, won't be difficult if everybody starts with a spirit of a united Umno. However, she says if along the way people think there is a different kind of Umno, then it is going to be hard.

"I feel that if you steer towards understanding the needs of your target group with accountability, transparency and good governance then people

will be interested to join you.

"Voters and Malaysian citizens are highly intelligent. So many of us are capable of thinking but sometimes, people dismiss politics because of fear of the unknown."

She is optimistic that there are many potential leaders among young women. "I'd like to groom them as I know there are many out there. We don't see them because of the culture we've created. Now, with Puteri Umno, I want to form a culture that is more friendly, open and understanding."

Azalina notes that Puteri Umno does not discriminate. "You make the choice of what you want to be. There isn't going to be a dress code, no do's and don'ts and no impossible expectations.

"It will cater to young women (in their 20s) - the generation of globalisation and the k-economy."

They are young women who are mothers, daughters or future wives who can be the catalysts of change and agents of nation building.

"I have been using these words again and again as I have been trying to make people understand that young women can make a difference. There's no denying that they form the biggest number in universities as well as at senior-management levels of public and private sectors."

Some may think Azalina aspires to be a political animal, wanting something out of the position but the feisty woman stresses that she is trying to create an entity that is the opposite of that.

"I want to see changes and I want to be a part of them but I can't do it if there is politicking for positions, hidden agendas, divide-and-rule type of leadership, ecetera.

"I can imagine the shock I cause with my views. People often ask me 'Aren't you afraid?.' But if everybody thinks that way what is going to happen to women?"

She says women are jointly responsible for the system today and that women, regardless of political parties or philosophies, should unite.

"You cannot expect only women's groups to speak out against sexual harassment or domestic violence while you sit and complain. We have to ask ourselves what we want and make that change.

"We have political organisations discriminating against women or refusing to address women's issues. They are around you and you allow them to enhance their political thinking and philosophy. In the end, you are the one who's the victim. This, I don't understand."

Azalina now holds a new key to a new door and she wants all women to assist her in making a change for themselves and their daughters.

"There have been many doors opened for women lately but I have a new one. I don't know where the door is but I know the key is there."

According to her, Puteri Umno is separate from Wanita Umno and it does not intend to compete but to complement and support.

While there are many women's issues she is passionate about and looking forward to champion and uphold, Azalina is most bothered by one that concerns religion.

"What is most sad is that when religion is so beautiful and Islam is deemed as the way of life, it is still abused by some quarters in society."

\* The writer can be contacted at [dazman@nstp.com.my](mailto:dazman@nstp.com.my)

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