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To Erra, oops, to err is only human

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IT WAS quite a coup for Puteri Umno chief Azalina Othman Said to get singer cum actress Erra Fazira to join the movement as a pro-tem committee member.

"Erra in unfamiliar role" said one news report, with another headlining the story as "New Erra in Umno".

Reactions differed as to Erra's venture into the political arena, but some young and enthusiastic male political reporters have started asking for the Puteri Umno beat.

Detractors of Umno described the move to recruit Erra as a cheap political gimmick by a party desperate to attract support.

Supporters of Umno were happy that a well-known personality like Erra had chosen Umno and not any of the other political parties especially those from the Opposition.

The bottom line is that Erra's move to be part of the Puteri Umno set up has caught the attention of many.

While it is Puteri Umno's gain, it could be Erra's lost, given the fact that Malays are subscribers to politics of partisanship.

No doubt, it was important for Azalina, or rather Puteri Umno, in its fledgling stage, to be in the limelight and have a star attraction to help in its recruitment drive for membership.

As pointed out earlier, given the intensity of the political divide, Erra's decision to join Umno may endear herself further to those who support the party. But at the same time, she may lose some fans who are supporters of opposition parties, especially Parti Keadilan Nasional.

But Erra need not worry about fans from Pas because the party would not condone members idolising a female star who, like her, does not adorn the tudung.

Her concern should be fans who support Keadilan or those who are partyless but oppose Umno.

If she had taken time to reflect of what happened to songstress Siti Nurhaliza a couple of years back, she would probably be more prepared to handle whatever backlash that may come along for her decision to join Umno.

Siti did not join Umno but in a live performance, decided to share her thoughts with the audience, urging them to support the Government and at the same time beware of foreign interference.

Whether she said it with the intention of supporting someone or merely speaking out loud her personal thoughts, Keadilan information chief Ruslan Kassim was quick to latch on her remarks and accused her of making a statement similar to that of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Ruslan immediately called for party members to boycott Siti's albums.

It was a matter of concern for Siti that she refused to discuss the matter further and her managers were known to get all prickly if reporters asked her to comment on the matter.

But looking at the continued popularity of Siti and her consistently high album sales, it can be concluded that Siti's voice is more appealing than Ruslan's.

If Erra chooses to use the outcome of Siti's shortlived, non-premeditated venture into politics, she should be able to find comfort in her decision to join Puteri Umno.

But more of concern, not only for Erra, but also the rest of the politically indulging Malay community, is the fact that preference of a public figure is not based on his or her ability but rather their political affiliation.

At the same time, the urgency in the community to promote freedom of choice and speech had taken a near oxymoronic understanding.

In the case of Erra, her decision of joining Puteri Umno, if leading to a call to boycott her, would mean she is only allowed to exercise her freedom of choice if she joined the opposition party.

Similarly in the case of Siti. If her speech had been supportive of Keadilan or Ruslan, then she had exercised freedom of choice but if she chose to be leaning towards Dr Mahathir or Umno, then she is a stooge, or worst, forced to utter the words.

Of course, there had been other artistes the world over who had made their political choices in life and ended up being chastised by those from the opposing pole.

Names like India's movie idol MGR, Hollywood's Ronald Reagan who went on to become the President of the US and Indonesia's songbird Hetty Koes Endang are some of those who had taken the steps before Erra.

MGR, as far as the record shows, persisted to be idolised though some who supported other political parties may have resented him in his political convictions.

Similarly with Reagan. The Democrats may dismiss his term as the president to be inconsequential but fans of his movies, regardless whether they are Republicans or Democrats, continue to enjoy them.

Hetty too continues to enjoy a strong following from her fans in Indonesia from a cross-section of the political divide and not only those from the Islamists Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (the United Development Party).

The point is that, these stars did not face a decline in their popularity as actors or singers though they may be criticised for their political choices.

But Erra, like Siti before her, may find such a situation not prevalent within the Malay community.

Sadly too, those who chastised them are those who seem to be in the forefront in promoting freedom of speech and choice.

If Erra had expected that her role as an artist will not be affected following her decision to join Puteri Umno, she may have to think again.

But she can derive some satisfaction and face the repercussions bravely if she had made the decision to join Puteri Umno upon her own convictions.

If not, then she can tell her fans that to Erra, oops, to err, is only human.

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