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Puteri Umno travels a bumpy road as it approaches its own election

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A YEAR ago, Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammad launched Puteri Umno, a young women's wing in the party. Amid much applause, some criticisms notwithstanding, it was envisaged to attract more young and professional women to Umno.

One year on, Puteri has managed to dispel the misconception among young professionals that politics is dirty, and draw them to the organisation.

Now comes the election. For many, this will provide the young Umno members with an opportunity to determine the new wing's destiny.

A total of 660 delegates will have the final say over who among the candidates will hold key positions in the movement.

The ballot box will determine who will be the permanent chairman, her deputy, the Puteri Umno chief and deputy, and the 20 Exco members.

Thus far, the three contenders for the chief's post are the pro-tem chief Azalina Othman Said, former information chief Mastina Abdul Hamid and Raihan Suleiman @ Sulaiman Palestine, a Kulim/Bandar Baru Wanita Umno division committee member.

To woo the delegates, Mastina said besides focusing on socio-economic issues, Puteri should also emphasise religious programmes, which she claimed were neglected by the wing under Azalina. Raihan, meanwhile, has come up with a slogan of sincerity, and offering herself as an alternative.

The inner circle in the movement say Azalina is the favourite but with the changing scenario, they say the other contenders cannot be ruled out.

To many, since the inception of Puteri, it seems that Azalina could do no wrong. In just a year, Azalina, a lawyer by profession, has risen to political stardom.

But as the election looms, it appears nothing she does can satisfy her critics, some of whom have begun to question her commitment and credibility.

Azalina came under fire when she and her current pro-tem committee members made courtesy calls on Umno leaders in the run-up to the Puteri elections.

She had been asked to stop making such visits as party leaders do not want the action to be construed as lobbying for support, which is against party election ethics.

The race between the personalities is hotting up. There are allegations of "threats and dirty tactics", police reports, rumours and speculation, some with religious connotations, spreading like wildfire and a promise of more to come.

Some have been the target of a vicious smear campaign, while those who have skeletons in the closet will find the going tough.

Many Umno members have quietly expressed disappointment with the new wing, for in the obsession among aspirants to win posts, they have resorted to membuka pekung di dada (washing dirty linen in public).

This, they said, would provide the Opposition with more ammunition to undermine Umno.

On top of that, what is interesting is that there is talk on the ground that the contenders would not have been so blatant in their challenge had they not been prodded by certain quarters.

This is especially so at the time when it is becoming fashionable for some Umno leaders, especially the ambitious and financially strong, to

position their people in prominent positions.

Party leaders have insisted they will remain neutral. But many take that at face value, believing that the leaders have their own favourite candidate.

One leader even said: "I think there is a hidden hand trying to create trouble within the movement."

Initially, the idea of Puteri posts being contested got many Umno figures worried as it could lead to a split in the movement. But political observers say contests are healthy.

"While Azalina will easily win, she needs to get endorsement to legitimise and make honourable her ascendancy to the post," said a senior Umno leader.

Observers argue that elections would not cause a dent and even if there was dust kicked up, the situation could still be controlled.

By the end of October, the delegates will have many candidates, hopefully credible ones, to pick from. And hopefully too, delegates should pick only the best ones who are capable, sincere and not chasing after party posts.

The question now: Will Puteri Umno ever get a chance to put a more liberal, new-generation agenda devoid of negative elements into practice, or will it be swayed by the old Umno tradition of squabbling for posts?

Being new, Puteri Umno must project the clean image of the party. This is vital as the party is currently viewed negatively by many non-members.

To begin with, Puteri Umno members must decide whether they wish to see the movement wilt or blossom. They must bear in mind that Pas has already started campaigning for the next general election, at a time when those in Umno, even the younger ones, are caught in their own quagmire of infighting.

Puteri Umno must avoid any disruptions in Umno, because the scramble for posts during its elections will be welcomed by the Opposition.

Should they get embroiled in small battles among themselves, they will risk losing the war, which may well be very near in 2004, and worse, they will be the laughing stock of others.