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The Pink Brigade marches on

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THE absence of Puteri Umno chief Azalina Othman Said at the Wanita Umno Hari Raya open house seemed to have got some people talking and asking why she was not there.

Someone put on record that Azalina and Puteri Exco members were given invitations to the function. It appeared that Azalina was the only one absent.

"Maybe she has other more important engagements," another sighed.

But it was generally agreed that as the Puteri Umno leader, Azalina could at least "show her face for a few minutes" and then if she really could not stand to be with the makcik-makcik, she could give 1,001 excuses and leave.

One gets the feeling that bygones have not been let off as bygones.

Azalina's absence at the open house had brought back those old bad feelings the movement and its younger sister had in those early formative days of Puteri Umno.

Has the dust settled and have things between both sides improved?

Wanita and Puteri leaders say that relations between them have progressed because they both have common goals.

The "Azalina-absent-at-Wanita gathering" incident was just a little ruffle in a little feather.

Both might have an unpleasant start but the future is their concern and the will to re-invent the party to face the 2004 general election is too paramount to allow for personal distractions.

If getting along seemed a tall order only during Puteri's formative years, it is today a natural course of things.

Perhaps, it has to do with growing maturity and the gathering of experience. Perhaps, even the reality of politics and political survival. Sometimes too, contrasts can be compatible.

Here is Wanita Umno - a product of history and a long political struggle. Its record is impeccable and its contributions, so immense.

And on the other side is a neophyte, a fledgling political movement whose members are so different from the other older movement. The irritating label of makcik-makcik of Wanita seemed to have died, although not a natural death.

But Puteri Umno has learnt to appreciate the worth of this makcik party.

The idea of Puteri Umno came about after the 1999 general election in response to the shift of Malay support away from the party, in particular the youth.

Umno hoped that the birth of Puteri Umno could inject fresh blood into the party membership.

But, the well-meaning Azalina started off poorly, stepping on toes when she presented to Umno president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, a proposal that was thought to be "insensitive".

Among others, she labelled the older members in Wanita as makcik.

In the Malay psyche, someone who is described as a makcik is dismissed as one who is devoid of exuberance, ideas and well, even her usefulness.

Wanita was angry with Azalina for submitting the working paper to Dr Mahathir without consulting them.

She was simply a smart aleck and even kurang ajar, as far as Wanita Umno was concerned. At the height of this, accusations and counter-accusations were hurled.

Wanita appeared to be the villain, bent on preventing Azalina from forming a movement that was to give a breath of fresh air to Umno.

Rafidah, so tired and fed up with this perception, declared at the Umno general assembly last year that Wanita Umno had never opposed the formation of Puteri Umno. In fact, the movement welcomed Puteri as it would enhance the party further.

Today, Wanita leaders said they have put their differences behind them and expressed the hope that the relationship between them could progress well.

Wanita Umno secretary-general Datuk Faridah Abu Hassan said the most important thing now was for the two movements to be united "so that we speak with one voice".

"We, women should stick together and stand united for a common cause.

"Any squabbling or possible competition will further erode our strength which is especially pertinent when the women in the party have yet to be given equal treatment by the more illustrious male-dominated supreme council," she said.

Touching on the unpleasant past, she said that whatever reminders directed at Puteri Umno were sincere and should not be construed as belittling them.

Puteri Umno secretary-general Noraini Ahmad said relations between Wanita and Puteri are progressing well.

"Azalina in her many speeches has always urged Puteri members to work together with the Wanita and Youth movements."

Selangor Puteri Umno chief Nora Aznin Radzuan likened the relationship to that of sisters.

"I am not trying to sing praises of Wanita Umno, but they have really helped us during the initial stages and even now they have never failed to include us in all their activities.

"If the women are united, it will further strengthen the Wanita movement and ensure that women's voices in the party would be heard," she said.

Her views were shared by Federal Territory Puteri Umno chief Azlinda Mohd Rasad, who said that the relations between them were getting much better.

With the new-found strength, both Wanita and Puteri can now work towards intensifying the struggle for women, such as for better representation in the party leadership and the general assembly.

Umno Youth treasurer Wan Mohamad Khairil Wan Ahmad, referring to the earlier relations between Wanita Umno and Puteri Umno, said that such uncomfortable feelings were part and parcel of politics.

"One must take this as a healthy competition. But if they can forego all their differences and channel their energies to productive ends, they would certainly be a powerful force to be reckoned with.

"If they unite, others will respect women members and their voices will be heard," he added.

A political observer said competition or some sort between the two movements was good at this stage.

"It would make both wings more dynamic. Both could work on tackling national and women issues better."

A division leader admitted that Azalina's way of doing things had jolted the Wanita members as she is seen by many quarters as aggressive and too NGO-ish.

"But she can do the job. We need somebody like her to further help strengthen the party. Being new in this 'business', she may step on other people's toes but that is not deliberate," he said.

He also said that to avoid head-on collision, Puteri leaders should show respect to the older women members.

As politics go, even this fledgling movement is not spared intrigues. Factions and back-stabbing seem to have taken root in Puteri Umno.

The gossip in town is that certain Puteri Umno state chiefs were sidelined for being too close to Wanita members.

Said a division chief: "Luckily there is not going to be any election for Puteri Umno in the near future that will drag the girls into the political game."

The improved relations between the two movements show a political will to overcome adversity.

Azalina's absence at the Wanita Umno open house should not be overplayed, said a Wanita leader. "Don't read too much into it. This is not the time."

Said Bagan Datoh division chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi: "This reflected the political maturity of the Wanita movement which knows the benefit of forgiving and forgetting for the sake of party unity.

"You can be as different as chalk and cheese but a partnership can only resonate if sacrifices are made," he said.

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