

Puteri Umno faces transition

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PETALING JAYA: Puteri Umno, the still nascent third wave of Umno, will cross yet another watershed when it holds its first ever assembly on Wednesday.

The young Malay women's wing, which was inaugurated at last year's general assembly, will finally have its first formal assembly after two "impactful" years since its launch.

"Puteri Umno is seen almost everywhere. No one can say that we are just an accessory to the party. We are complementary to Umno and our pink colour theme is now like a brand name in politics," said Puteri Umno chief Azalina Othman Said.

This assembly, she added, will be important in establishing the young women as the third wave in Umno politics.

But Puteri's maiden assembly may also, ironically, be

Azalina's last as the movement's leader. The lawyer-turned-politician turns 40 this year and will not be able to contest another term because the Puteri constitution has a 40-year age limit on its top leadership.

Hence, Puteri, which has 138,000 members, will also have to start preparing for its own leadership transition.

Its delegates will also be watching the Puteri exco as they take their place on stage, since the next Puteri leader is likely to come from one of them and possibly a state leader.

A large number of Puteri delegates are practically children of the Mahathir era, having known no other Prime Minister other than Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"Puteri was born during Dr Mahathir's time, so, it is with a great sense of loss that this will be the last time we will see him at the general assembly as

Prime Minister. But we are also excited at the prospect of working with the next president, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi," said Pahang Puteri head Shahaniza Shamsudin.

The Puteri girls are also among the most well-educated group, having benefited from the New Economic Policy's (NEP) stress on education and training.

But for many years, Umno was complacent about Malay women of this generation. It was only after the beating suffered by the party in the 1999 general election that Umno took concerted steps to engage them.

In that sense, Puteri is a symbol of the way Umno has reclaimed the loyalty of the NEP generation of young Malay girls.

But whether Umno's youngest wing will take off to great heights remains to be tested in the years ahead.