

30/06/2004

Puteri plays politics

By Zubaidah Abu Bakar

CAMPAIGNING for the Puteri Umno elections has intensified despite strict rules against it and a desire to maintain unity, writes ZUBAIDAH ABU BAKAR.

CAUTIOUS optimism has enveloped Puteri Umno as a leadership contest looms. The guarded stance is understandable as almost everyone in the party is talking about the need to refrain from forming factions that threaten to break up the organisation.

But many feel that unity will be maintained no matter the contest.

"I believe in a matter of weeks, everything will be forgotten and all Puteri members will stand firmly behind the chosen candidate."

These are the confident words of Suraya Yaacob, one of the hopefuls for the top post.

Suraya does not believe that contests for the two top posts of the youngest Umno movement will cause a major rift among members.

To her, Puteri members are mature and will choose the best candidates as leaders.

After all, the emergence of camps is part and parcel of an election and normal in politics, argues the 35-year-old lawyer and Sungai Tiang assemblyman.

Suraya also regards the contest for the top posts as part of a learning curve before members graduate to the mainstream of Wanita Umno after they cross the 35-year age limit.

Suraya is expected to face current vice-chief Noraini Ahmad for the chief's post, which will be vacated by Datuk Azalina Othman Said, who has exceeded the maximum age of 40 for the position.

Noraini, who is past 35, is also unable to defend her post, which she had won uncontested.

So far, no other Puteri leaders have come forward to contest the movement's No 1 post.

The possibility of seeing other names nominated by Puteri divisions holding their meetings next month cannot be ruled out.

Puteri Umno's constitution does not bar those outside Puteri from contesting for the top post. Only two nominations are needed for a candidate to contest any post in the movement.

However, the chances of an "outsider" coming in are slim. Puteri grassroots members have voiced their preference for a rank and file contender for Azalina's post.

Another condition is that the contenders must have contributed to the movement at the branch, division or national level.

"They want those contesting for the post to come from within Puteri. The movement also wants aspirants for the top Puteri post to be open-minded, inspirational and to refrain from character assassination," says Azalina, who won the Puteri chief's post uncontested at its maiden elections two years ago.

Azalina's experience then was not a bed of roses despite her being the key person who pushed for its formation.

The Youth and Sports Minister was attacked over her alleged sexual preferences and mismanagement of the movement in the run-up to the elections.

One can imagine how difficult it was for Azalina to face the public. Of course, Puteri members did not turn a blind eye to her hard work and

sacrifice when the movement was at its infancy.

Azalina garnered all 165 nominations for the chief's post while the four challengers - former Puteri Umno information chief Mastina Abdul Hamid, Kulim/Bandar Baru Wanita division committee member Raihan Sulaiman, Seri Pandan branch chief Mazibah Md Zin and Hulu Klang Wanita member Umami Hafilda Ali - failed to receive a single nomination.

Not wanting this political malaise, which afflicted the older generation in Umno to spread to the younger set, former party president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad sternly told Puteri members to reject such a culture.

Dr Mahathir also reminded Puteri members to focus their energy on the party's struggle and make more efforts to understand Umno's politics better.

The warning and reminder should remain fresh in the minds of Puteri Umno delegates and observers of the movement's inaugural assembly.

Or does it? The unhealthy trait seems to be rearing its ugly head again. And this time it is Suraya's ordeal.

Until today, Suraya, who is also Kedah Puteri Umno chief, cannot figure out what the so-called "18SX" photograph of her and some friends is.

The photograph, purportedly taken during a holiday with a group of friends in Bali, Indonesia last August is said to be in the possession of a Puteri member and is being circulated.

"Yes, I was in Bali but I do not know of such a photograph nor have I seen it," says Suraya, who suspects her happy-go-lucky nature is the factor that often lands her in controversies and scandals.

In the last general election, people in Umno circles claimed to have seen a photograph of her with an unidentified man.

Noraini, meanwhile, expresses hope for a clean contest.

"We do not know yet. There might be other nominations besides the two of us (Suraya and herself). Whatever it is, I am prepared. The post is open for contest and nominations have yet to be made by the divisions.

"What is important is that we not say bad things about each other during the campaigning period," says the 37-year-old development consultant, who is said to have an edge over Suraya.

Being the No. 2 in the movement, Noraini is said to be the natural choice of some of the 700-odd delegates casting their votes on Sept 22.

Word is also going around that she is the preferred candidate of acting party president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi but such claims have been dismissed by many, including Puteri exco members.

Noraini won the vice-chief's post after two other contenders - Pahang chief Shahaniza Samsuddin and Penang chief Azlina Mehtab Mohd Ishaq - withdrew.

Noraini also shares Suraya's view that the emergence of camps is unavoidable.

"This is only temporary and although it appears as if we have different camps, in the end we are all friends and are willing to co-operate with one another."

Camps, no doubt, will emerge as each candidate vies for support. Noraini is teaming up with Sabah Puteri head and Papar Member of Parliament Rosnah Shirlin Abdul Rashid, who is going for the No. 2 post.

Suraya, on the other hand, has chosen 34-year-old Bibi Sharliza Mohd Khalid, the State Assemblywoman for Paroi as her running mate.

Still, Suraya does not rule out the possibility of reaching a compromise with Noraini and opting for the deputy's post instead.

"I am all prepared to seek election as the Puteri Umno head but I am also keeping my options open."

The contest for the movement's 20 executive council posts won't be a tame affair either, as seven incumbents have passed the age limit.

While Umno does not prevent contests for posts, it is only right that the process be carried out systematically and with decorum.

The acting party president has expressed fears that camps formed in the run-up to party elections can disunite members.

And time will tell whether members in opposing camps will unite after the contest is over, true to the Malay adage "Biduk lalu kiambang bertaut".

Puteri Umno elections on Sept 22 will surely be keenly watched as they will reflect how far members have matured politically.

(END)