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Three women leaders vying for council seats

By Anna Maria Samsudin

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - The Umno elections in September will see three high-profile women on the list of aspirants for the party's supreme council seats.

With Umno divisions having officially concluded their delegates' meetings, delegates to the party's general assembly will see Wanita Umno vice-chief Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, Puteri Umno chief Datuk Azalina Othman Said and Wanita Umno Exco member Datuk Dr Norraesah Mohamad in the contest with 61 others for the 25 council seats.

Shahrizat, who is Women, Family and Community Development Minister, last week lamented the all-male affair, saying that women usually stood little chance of faring well in the elections.

Shahrizat with 133 nominations and Azalina, 134, are in the top 15. Dr Norraesah is 31st in the list.

Azalina and Norraesah are incumbent appointed members.

Shahrizat's worry is not unfounded. In the 2000 party elections, none of the women who contested won. She was one of the five women contenders. The others were Datuk Paduka Siti Zaleha Ismail, Norraesah, Datuk Maznah Hamid and Raja Ropiah Raja Abdullah.

Subsequently, then party president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad appointed Norraesah, Azalina and Dr Siti Zaharah to the council.

So this time around, how will the trio fare?

If they lose, said Malaysian Strategic Research Centre executive director Abdul Razak Baginda, it would not be because Umno delegates were sexist or that voting was gender-biased.

It was because of the absence of "strong" female politicians in the party, he said.

He said Umno had yet to see a woman politician with the strong leadership credibility and personality able to generate strong support from both men and women members.

He said it was unfair to say women's failure to get elected to the council was due to "gender bias".

The supreme council election is simple - delegates will vote for those who are politically strong and popular in the party.

"Let's look at the three. Both Shahrizat and Azalina still have a long way to go in strengthening their position in the party while Norraesah does not have enough grassroots support. Logically, how do you think they will fare against male candidates who are mostly heavyweights in the party?"

Pontian division chief Hasni Mohamad said delegates' votes were usually based on the candidate's track record and contribution to the party.

"Gender is not an issue. Delegates usually vote for those who will be useful to the party based on their expertise or influence."

He also agreed that there were delegates who preferred to vote for candidates with strong leadership qualities and who were popular in the party.

"My vote goes to candidates who can contribute towards the development of the party and its members."

Hasni also agreed that the supreme council should have more women members and called for more women to offer themselves for the post.

"They should not just wait to be nominated. If they are interested in the post, they should just make their intention known to party members,"

he added.

Both Shahrizat and Norraesah have been endorsed by the Wanita Umno executive council. Azalina, who has to vacate her Puteri Umno post as she has exceeded the age limit, is contesting on her own steam.

Dr Siti Zaharah, who is Paya Besar Member of Parliament and former National Unit and Social Development Minister, got only seven nominations.

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