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A truly feminine feminist

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IT was the astute Datuk Razak Hussein (later Tun) who in 1956 made a remarkable decision: to recommend Fatimah Hashim, a relatively unknown 32-year-old housewife, to Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra as the new head of Kaum Ibu, Umno's unfledged women's wing.

Years later, Tun Razak told me his reason: "A wife of a senior civil servant will not only be reliable but Fatimah comes from an impeccable Umno background. She will present the right image of Kaum Ibu to the country."

Fatimah did, indeed. She decisively sought rural Malay women to form the backbone of Kaum Ibu, whose membership until then comprised essentially teachers, wives of civil servants and women in towns and suburbs.

Tan Sri Fatimah Hashim was always, by her own admission, first a wife and mother. Today's fire-breathing feminists might want to burn me at the stake for revelling in that statement, but Fatimah's peerless political career affirms rather than denies the qualities inherent in those two domestic roles.

It was as the potentially iconic wife and mother that she impressed Tengku and he agreed to Tun Razak's choice. It turned out to be an inspired one.

Fatimah, then as now, at age 78, never looked like a politician. She has always looked to me like the made-to-measure wife and mother - proper, elegant and a little prim under the burden of husband and children.

Even in retirement, after a substantial career in public service, she appears miscast in the masculine arena of party politics.

Her choice was no less inspired for having been made under some duress. Her feisty predecessor Khatijah Sidek had just been expelled for "flouting party discipline", and Umno had lost one of its best campaigners in the field.

Khatijah, a legend in her day, was everything Fatimah was not. She was a firebrand orator, garlanding her speeches with Sukarno-esque flourishes, and drew large crowds from the multitudes influenced by Indonesia's independence.

She once famously said in Parliament as an Opposition MP: "If you men have no guts, take my selendang and let me wear your songkok." That sort of confrontational stance, which animated her entire career, was bound to rub Umno's genteel (and male) leadership the wrong way.

Khatijah switched sides and became chairman of the women's wing of PMIP, the precursor of today's Pas. But her lone assault at male domination was doomed to fail. In the 1969 general election, she left the PMIP after again clashing with its top leaders and contested as an independent. She lost and is now remembered only by historians.

Khatijah, whom I got to know when she was PMIP MP for Dungun, was more akin to Fatimah's successor, Aishah Ghani (later Tan Sri), who was educated in Indonesia and later in London.

Khatijah's decline and Fatimah's rise illustrate the point that in politics, organisation and mobilisation are more important than the charisma of leaders or the power of ideologies.

Kaum Ibu had to be more than the sum of its (admittedly colourful) personalities. To turn itself into a political force, the women's wing had to have an image and a message.

Fatimah provided them. Recalling her appointment, she told a news

magazine in 1994: "It had to be leadership by example. To be a Malay leader, especially if you are a woman, your whole lifestyle must be blameless. The husband and children must be well taken care of, the house must be in tip-top condition, and you yourself must be well turned out on all occasions."

Hardly leading-edge feminism, but no less worthy of emulation by both sexes in politics today, especially men. In her time, however, Fatimah knew her place.

She had followed her husband, Abdul Kadir Yusof (later Tan Sri, Attorney-General and Law Minister), to Ipoh, where he was a magistrate.

Born in Muar, Johor, she had been a member of Kaum Ibu since 1947, aged 22, while Umno was under its first president Datuk Onn Jaafar, the State's most famous son and the party's founding father.

Working from home in Perak, a State she barely knew, she set out to turn Kaum Ibu into a mass movement, following in the footsteps of its male seniors.

She started with a "slim file" of names and by 1966 had fattened it to 100,000 members. She won her first election in 1959, not in Perak but in a State even farther from her birthplace, Kedah.

It wasn't just a matter of enlistment and recruitment. Umno had rapidly evolved from a party with limited aims - to demolish the hated Malayan Union, found the Federation of Malaya and fight for independence, and thence the formation of Malaysia - to one of possibly unlimited ones, as the governing party of a new nation.

It could not rely on stump speeches, rhetoric and the hypnosis of words and slogans anymore. It had to forge an electoral machinery stretching into every village and hamlet across the country.

Fatimah, devoted wife and nurturing mother, had the talents necessary to carry out the spadework from which lasting edifices are built. She set up branches everywhere, travelling on foot, by boat and motorbike, even by elephant.

Setting up the structure of a national party network upon a largely rural populace which knew nothing about politics was only the first step. Fatimah had to fill it out and turn it into a working political apparatus.

This may sound quaint today, but Kaum Ibu had to be given something to do in order to give value and purpose to itself and its members. Fatimah and her cadres taught village women how to hold meetings, keep minutes and records and canvass for elections.

More fundamentally, they were taught to read and write, given religious instruction and self-improvement lessons in cooking, domestic science, dressmaking, knitting, housekeeping and health care.

These rustic tupperware parties became the building blocks of the movement as it exists today. By 1972, Kaum Ibu had outgrown itself. It was no longer a collective of mothers, ancillary and subservient to the men.

Fatimah proposed a name-change to "Wanita Umno", both as a more accurate description of its membership and the partnership this represented with the male half of the party.

Above all a gentlewoman, Fatimah recognised that the image and message she fostered had been eclipsed, both by the party's growth and the advance in women's rights, which she herself had spearheaded as the first woman Cabinet Minister (holding the Welfare portfolio from 1959 to 1973).

Fatimah's outstanding success had left the old Kaum Ibu looking rather dowdy, just as Wanita Umno's progress left it looking over-maternal in recent years, leading to the formation of Puteri Umno.

At the age of 49, she resigned from the Cabinet and stood down at the 1974 general election to mark the end of the "first wave" of women leaders in Umno and make way for her "children".

Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, a protege of both Tun Razak and Fatimah, now leads the movement.

Last Friday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad launched *Tan Sri Fatimah: Portrait of a Leader*, a biography written by Dr Nik Safiah Karim and Dr Rokiah Talib. Though not definitive, I recommend it highly to aspiring leaders.

Since its formation more than five decades ago, the legend of Wanita Umno lives on and today Wanita and Puteri Umno face a greater challenge than ever before. Their contribution will be crucial to Umno's and the Barisan Nasional's victory in the next general election.