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Wives give insight into leaders

FOR one, it will be her final Umno general assembly as the wife of the party president and Prime Minister; and, for the other, it will be the last she is attending as the spouse of the party deputy president.

Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali is more relieved than sad at the prospect, while Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, who will be attending next year as wife of the party president, is ready for whatever the future brings.

Dr Siti Hasmah gave a frank insight of what it has been like to be by the side of the country's seemingly tireless Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In an interview on the sidelines of the assembly at the Putra World Trade Centre, Dr Siti Hasmah said she was more relieved than sad over Dr Mahathir's impending retirement in October.

"As a wife who is always at home with him, I know how hard he works. He writes his speeches himself although he sometimes gets drafts from the organisers. He has his own style.

"When I see his face as he goes off to sleep, I see how tired he is and I feel really sorry for him. But I am glad, Alhamdulillah, that God has blessed him with good health and a clear mind to continue with what he wants to do."

She said while Dr Mahathir did not have a "specific programme" as to what he would be doing after retirement, Dr Siti Hasmah acknowledged that he would have more time to indulge in his hobbies when he retires.

They would also be moving closer to their children in Kuala Lumpur so that they could spend more time with their loved ones.

"He can continue writing articles, he will read, go horse-riding every Sunday, and go around town. He can also go back to his hobby - woodwork. There are so many things he would like to do but he does not want to plan. It is not his habit to have a programme."

But, Dr Siti Hasmah said, both of them would "remain the same" even after Dr Mahathir's retirement.

"We are after all human beings. When we retire, we will still be as we are. We are really touched and humbled by the kind words directed to Dr Mahathir by delegates."

Dr Siti Hasmah advised the spouses of politicians to understand and appreciate the duties of their husbands or wives.

"I can understand my husband's duties as a politician and government servant. But I know I will have to sacrifice. It can be a dilemma sometimes especially when there are young children."

Dr Siti Hasmah also touched on the conception of Dr Mahathir's opening speech at the assembly yesterday.

"My husband spent a lot of time on the speech, a lot of attention. He wanted to remind us that we are vulnerable even though we are independent. We are vulnerable to powers with a lot of money and with the technology to make sophisticated weapons."

She said Dr Mahathir spent two months during their holidays to write the speech.

However, Dr Siti Hasmah said after coming up with the draft of the speech in his own handwriting, Dr Mahathir cancelled it all just one week before the assembly.

"He rewrote everything but this time it was smooth as he already had an idea of what he wanted to say. By the grace of God, the speech was

delivered smoothly and he managed to control himself.

"He was afraid he would not be able to complete the speech but Alhamdulillah, he read it until the end."

She described it as "a wonderful speech". "I am glad he completed it but sad, because we both know, it is his last address. I prayed there will be no emotional incidents and thankfully, everything was smooth and successful."

Endon expressed admiration for Dr Siti Hasmah, citing her strength and patience as something she had always looked up to.

"When Pak Lah (Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) got the post, I went to see her. She thinks I have a very serious face so all she said to me was 'Smile more, Endon'."

"I have a lot of respect for her, and I will miss her but I know she will always be there for me."

Endon said she was never involved in politics but as Abdullah's wife, she had to learn what it was all about.

"When people come to see him to discuss politics, they can never see me around. In fact, to this day, Pak Lah has never discussed politics with me. He is one person who will not give me a chance to discuss politics with him ...he knows I am not interested."

"Even now, I don't think I will be involved in politics as I was not involved in it from the beginning. But, of course, I have to put in some interest."

Endon said, however, that she did express her concern to Abdullah about the world of politics at the height of the crisis involving former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

"I asked Pak Lah how he could stay on in politics but he told me that everything was fated."

Asked whether she discussed with Abdullah on who should fill the post of Deputy Prime Minister when he became Prime Minister, Endon said it was not her place to be involved.

On whether she was prepared to be the wife of the Prime Minister, Endon said: "I am very seasoned too. We have been in and out of all this for over 20 years. The bitter and sweet of politics is not new to me."

Besides, she said Dr Mahathir has done so much work and left behind a very strong Umno. "Pak Lah's work will be so much easier because of that."