

Najib tells Umno Wanita: Back Shahrizat as your chief

MalaysiaKini.com

March 23, 2012

By Nigel Aw

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak told the Umno Wanita meeting attended by some 7,000-strong grassroots members today that their chief Shahrizat Abdul Jalil need not resign her party post.

NONEThis, Najib said, was because there was no proof yet of guilt on the part of Shahrizat in the National Feedlot Corporation (NFC) government loan abuse scandal.

"The Umno Wanita chief is elected, and based on the party's policies and principles, as long as there is no proof of wrong-doing, there is no reason for Shahrizat to resign as Wanita head," he told a press conference after addressing the Wanita members.

The meeting today appeared to be a move to quell any dissent within the wing against Shahrizat, which could potentially threaten the party's election machinery in an anticipated early general election.

Attendees led to pledge loyalty to leaders

To this end, the thousands of Umno Wanita members were led to recite a pledge of loyalty to their leaders, including to Shahrizat.

NFC, managed by Shahrizat's family, is accused of mismanaging a RM250 million government loan, intended for the country's cattle-rearing project to increase the local supply of beef, and of investing several millions of ringgit into luxury properties and holiday trips.

NONEHer husband, Mohamed Ismail Salleh, has since been charged with two counts of criminal breach of trust involving RM49 million from the loan.

However, Najib said, Shahrizat was mindful of this and has taken moral responsibility by announcing that she will step down as women, family, and community development minister when her senatorship expires on April 8.

"Even though there is yet to be proof of legal wrong-doing, because this issue involves her family, she has taken the moral responsibility and respectfully resigned as a cabinet minister," he said.

'No bad blood'

Stressing that the wing must focus on the looming general election, Najib also denied that any bad blood existed between Shahrizat and her deputy, Kamilia Ismail.

"I will make sure that they work closely together to ensure that the Wanita wing is fully intact and is able to fully function," the prime minister added.

umno 2007 wanita 071107 kamilia ibrahimKamilia (left) fired a salvo at Shahrizat yesterday, calling on her to relinquish her post as Umno Wanita chief as well, citing the NFC controversy.

Meanwhile, at a separate press conference later, Shahrizat played down any feud with her deputy and said she was "not perturbed" by the flood of stinging criticism for her insistence on staying on as the wing's chief.

"My relationship with Kamilia is still good. I regard her as my elder sister. We have known each other since varsity days," she told reporters.

"I'm not easily hurt... the comments come from someone who is older to me. I understand how a lot of people feel, but I'm a leader and I must be able to take criticisms," said Shahrizat.

She added that although her reputation had been affected by the scandal, the support from the grassroots was "as in old times", even in the opposition-controlled constituencies.

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