

Zuraida: I have created a path for women

Malaysiakini

23 July 2021

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Slightly over two decades ago, Zuraida Kamaruddin was a career person specialising in consumer behaviour for big multinational brands without any political exposure.

Through fortuity and grit, she became involved in the nascent stage of PKR before eventually becoming a minister and is now regarded as one of the most powerful women in the country.

When asked what her message was to aspiring female leaders, Zuraida told Malaysiakini during a recent interview that her pathway was unconventional, but can be emulated.

"I made and created the path. Now I want to make it easier for women," the housing and local government minister said.

Women, she explained, had to create their own opportunities in order to enter the mainstream.

In 2001, Zuraida was already flourishing in the women's wing of Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKN) - the precursor to PKR. It was barely three years since the party was established, but she had learnt that being mainstream meant sitting among men, and she set out to do so.

That year, she aimed for the Bukit Bintang PKN division chief post and succeeded.

"Nobody wanted to become division chief for Bukit Bintang because they will have a chance to be fielded as an election candidate (since it was a DAP stronghold).

"So I went to talk to the guys there and they accepted me. I became division head because I wanted to have a say in the state council meetings among all the division chiefs.

"Along the way, I realised it was not enough to be in the state or divisions. I must go to the national level, then I can be part of mainstream politics," she explained.

Road to ministership

By 2007, Zuraida was elected PKR women's wing national head, earning her a seat in PKR's leadership council. Along with the title came the obligation to run for Parliament and she did so in Ampang, where she had resided since migrating from Singapore in her youth.

The 2008 general election was Zuraida's maiden electoral outing. She unseated Umno in the Ampang parliamentary constituency, securing 53 percent of the votes cast.

"I stay in Ampang and did a lot of charity work there. I have a lot of NGO connections. I chose to be fielded there, even though it was not considered a favourite because (Umno's majority in 2004 was) almost 20,000 votes.

"Nobody wanted it so it was easy for me to go in. No need to compete with the guys. The guys took the hot seats. I won," she said.

Having spent her schooling years abroad, the 63-year-old conceded that she knew little about Malaysian politics when she was swept by the reformasi swell.

Her impression of women in politics at the time was caricatured by "makcik-

makcik Umno", which she was not fond of.

However, her years of charity work - including international humanitarian missions - had prepared her to organise and raise funds - which were useful skills in politics.

"I set my sights on a direction and I just moved towards it. I came into it (PKR) alone and I built my strength and my grassroots.

"I was there for 20 years. Some Umno guys told me it took them 30 or 40 years to become a minister. So for me, 20 years (to get here) is not too long," she added.

Women leaders must serve

Zuraida said her policies - encouraging local councils to have a 30 percent female membership and to hire female contractors - were built on her previous work.

Her cadres are compelled to follow her path of humanitarian and charity work.

"I make them do that first - to serve the people in need. If you have that kind of passion, you can have the satisfaction of making people's lives better.

"If one has that kind of attitude when you are in politics and if you make people happy, you will have satisfaction. Satisfaction doesn't come from power. No.

"(Serving) should be the basis of one's satisfaction. Then you would not have regrets or disappointment. Along the way, whatever you achieve or get, then it will be good for you," she added.

Anwar-Azmin feud

Zuraida described 2020 as the latest chapter in her political career. It was the year where she and 10 other MPs left PKR to join forces with Bersatu to form the new Perikatan Nasional (PN) government.

This group of PKR defectors were eventually brought down to 10 as Selangau MP Baru Bian decided to stay out of PN. Collectively, the 10 former PKR lawmakers are known as "G10" in PN circles.

She explained that the tipping point for the group was the instability caused by PKR president Anwar Ibrahim's pressure on then prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad to hand over the premiership.

At the time, Mahathir's cabinet was still learning the ropes and Anwar's

behaviour made it more difficult to govern, she said.

Zuraida said she lost respect for Anwar when the latter compelled Danyal Balagopal Abdullah to resign as the Port Dickson MP, thereby paving way for a by-election in 2018.

To Zuraida, the right thing Anwar should have done at the time was to have his wife Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail - the Pandan MP - or his daughter Nurul Izzah Anwar - the Permatang Pauh MP - resign for him to contest in their constituency.

"He has not one but two (family members) there. Why did he take someone else's seat? It was very selfish of a leader," she said.

Pyrrhic victory

Later that year, PKR would have its internal leadership election, which again caused friction between Anwar and Zuraida. Zuraida was then PKR deputy president Azmin Ali's right-hand person and they campaigned as a team.

According to Zuraida, Anwar and Azmin had a gentleman's agreement that Anwar should win the party presidency uncontested. The incumbent - Wan Azizah - had chosen not to defend her seat.

"We wanted to field Azmin against Anwar, but Azmin said no. Azmin didn't want the party to be divided into two, regardless of who won.

"Azmin said: 'Nevermind'. He would stick to defending his deputy presidency. However, Anwar didn't honour his word.

"Azmin thought Anwar should reciprocate by not fielding anyone for the deputy presidency. Instead, Anwar sponsored Rafizi (Ramli) to challenge Azmin," she said.

The Azmin-Zuraida faction eventually won handsomely, winning three out of five vice-president seats, the majority of the positions in the national women's wing and the youth wing.

Despite the mandate given by party members to the Azmin-Zuraida faction, Zuraida said under Anwar's leadership, she and her team were eventually sidelined in major decision making.

"So what is the point of us winning the party elections?" asked Zuraida.

'We wanted reconciliation'

The Azmin-Zuraida faction would engage in a "cold war" with Anwar's faction for much of 2019 before efforts to reconcile were initiated ahead of the party's national delegates assembly in Malacca.

During that gathering, there was a fracas between supporters of both sides. Azmin's supporters also complained that Anwar goaded the delegates to humiliate them.

By January 2020, there were still efforts to reconcile but Zuraida said that these steps were done insincerely.

"I was okay with reconciliation, but then he (Anwar) did not show any changes. After (the incidents in) Malacca and that sort of thing, we decided to do it because they wanted to take action against me.

"Since the PN government accepted us, that's it! And we left the party.

"I have no regrets. I believe in doing my best wherever I am. When I am in Pakatan Harapan, I do my best, when I am in PN, I do my best. I have no regrets," she added.

Asked how she is convincing her constituents that her role in the toppling of the

Harapan government was necessary, Zuraida said she had no issue doing so because, after 13 years, she knows them well.

In the forthcoming general election, the Ampang MP expects a reduced majority, but a win nonetheless because of her deep engagement with her constituents.

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