

Rosmah not the first controversial politician's wife
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Rosmah Mansor isn't the first wife of a head of government in Malaysia to be accused of poking her nose into business that doesn't concern her. If it's not the recent ntv7 case, it will be some other issue where the wife will be found inviting unnecessary controversy.

NONERosmah has had unbelievably more than her fair share of detractors for one who has been the prime minister's wife for just over a year. This makes us all wonder what other controversies the future holds. It appears Najib's many detractors have discovered his Achilles heel.

Government TV stations are also unwittingly promoting this picture of Rosmah as a force to reckon with, and in the process implying the husband's weakness.

Take TV3 for example. The first item on its news channel will be Najib, followed by Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and Rosmah, and sometimes not necessarily in that order. Rosmah is always there among the first three news items no matter how newsworthy other items in the country and the world are.

rosmah mansor and lee kuan yew 160609Is it therefore any wonder that Singapore Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew specifically asked to meet with Rosmah one-to-one during a recent visit to Malaysia? Lee should have been denied his request since it painted a picture that Malaysia has a husband-and-wife team of two joint prime ministers.

Former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad was an extreme exception at the other end of the scale. He had a reputation reportedly for telling his wife, Siti Hasmah, things on a "need to know basis" or very little, if at all.

There's the national security aspect to consider as well. Hasmah even "complained" about being "shut out" during exclusive media interviews on a few occasions. So, the sycophants knew that she couldn't be used to get through to the husband. Or if she was used at all, everybody was very subtle about it. As a result, she escaped controversy during Mahathir's long innings while in power.

The growing unease with Rosmah, even among those outside the corridors of power and the opposition circles, provides interesting comparisons with her predecessors.

Kitchen cabinet

Many still recall that Suhailah Noah, the wife of the third prime minister Hussein Onn, came under some public suspicion in the late 1970s when DAP leader Lim Kit Siang accused Exxon of secretly over-producing oil from Malaysian wells.

Exxon of course initially sued Lim for libel and worse. The question that was raised was whether the prime minister's wife was actually "running Petronas, the national oil corporation, from home". The answer is still somewhere out there.

We will never know the truth since Hussein Onn resigned in the wake of the Exxon Affair and his own ill-health - which was politically expedient - and faded into obscurity. How Lim obtained the information appears to have had something to do with efforts to hasten

Hussein Onn's departure from the Prime Minister's Office. Not many will swear that this is the work of the conspiracy theorists. Suffice to say, the story broke when Lim mysteriously received an anonymous package which ignited the controversy.

It was déjà vu as well with Joseph Kitingan during his unprecedented four terms as Sabah chief minister. His wife Genevieve, it was openly whispered, was the gauntlet that everyone had to overcome before getting to the husband.

Not surprisingly, fingers were pointed at Genevieve when her husband got into difficulties quite early as chief minister and later when he was ousted from office. She was even accused of dictating the line-up of candidates, and this was the last straw for Yong Teck Lee - an ex-young turk - to split from PBS (Parti Bersatu Sabah) and form Sapp (Sabah Progressive Party) on the eve of the 1994 state election. Yong himself, ironically, owes his rise in politics to Genevieve.

Genevieve's "kitchen cabinet" apparently led to the younger Kitingan in politics, Jeffrey, parting company with his elder brother.

laila taib mahmud sulaiman taib 290409In neighbouring Sarawak, Laila Taib (far right) decided for almost 30 years who could and could not see her husband (Chief Minister Taib Mahmud) at their home in Demak Jaya, and for how long. She took charge of his appointment book.

This was a hot topic in the run-up to the Ming Court Affair of 1987 which would have seen her husband overthrown, if not for his uncle Abdul Rahman Yakub, who joined the plotters as their head and then discreetly tipped off the nephew.

Laila Taib and her children had considerable stakes in many projects awarded by the government. These were generally in joint-venture with state GLCs to give the arrangement a mask of respectability.

Rosmah in spotlight for wrong reasons

Now, it's Rosmah's turn to come under the public spotlight, and for the wrong reasons.

Three incidents highlight the predicament that she finds herself in, no thanks to the media advisors who swarm around her like ants drawn to sugar. If for nothing else, they underwrite the popular opinion that she still has difficulties finding a comfortable role for herself as the prime minister's wife.

The sycophants in the mainstream media who have mistakenly bestowed her the status of "first lady" in numerous reports continue to do great disservice to her and the prime minister. What about the queen? We don't have a presidential system of government where the term "first lady" makes sense.

NONEIn one of her first statements in the media on the eve of her husband's assumption of the premiership, Rosmah was quoted as saying that God wanted Najib to be the prime minister. Some people were determined to wreck her husband's tryst with destiny, she believed.

More recently, she reportedly told the people in Hulu Selangor that the prime minister had no time to debate with Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim because he "was very busy thinking how best to serve the people." That was really a cropper, considering that it's not

the done thing for an incumbent prime minister to refuse a debate with the opposition leader when the occasion demands it.

She continued to put her foot in her mouth in Hulu Selangor by adding that the prime minister was too busy to be present to thank them personally. So, she was doing it on his behalf. She didn't mention for what she was thanking them.

Away from home, no one could fault Jacqueline Kennedy in her public role during her husband's brief presidency. Likewise Indira Gandhi was above fault as the official hostess during her father's long widower years as the first prime minister of India. There are other examples from Sri Lanka (Srimao Bandaranaike) and Argentina (Eva Peron), among others, which should inspire Rosmah.

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