

Shahrizat Is A Poor Role Model For Women And Must Go

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by Mariam Mokhtar

We celebrated the centenary of International Women's Day this year, but the behaviour of the Women, Family and Community Development Minister, Shahrizat Abdul Jalil has been a great disappointment to Malaysian women.

She has let us down by abdicating her responsibilities. She has also refused to account for the financial irregularities in which RM250 million of taxpayer's money was used by the National Feedlot Corporation (NFC), a company run by her immediate family.

At the recently concluded Umno General Assembly, Shahrizat used the Umno Women's division to defend her role in the NFC scandal. She may have given one of her best speeches yet, but did it move the crowd? Perhaps.

When Shahrizat rolled back her sleeves as though she meant business, did it prove anything? No!

The NFC scandal was not something which the Opposition engineered. The whole mess surfaced when the Auditor-General made his report in the recent National Audit. The underlying problems still remain.

Many Umno delegates at the party conference, especially from the rural communities are unaware of this scandal.

Shahrizat surrounded herself with sycophants during the conference. Her main prop, Habibah Mohd Yusof praised Shahrizat for being "Malaysia's Aishwarya Rai", the Bollywood Queen.

Habibah is wrong. The role best suited to Shahrizat is "The Sheriff of Nottingham".

Shahrizat must feel she is waking up from a recurring nightmare or a migraine attack. Umno leaders should take heed. The reality is that the problem will not go away until someone takes responsibility for the whole débâcle. Right now, no one, from the Prime minister Najib Abdul Razak, downwards, has sought to clear the air once and for all.

If Najib thought that he could get away with it by keeping mum over the issue, and if the Cabinet believed that the problem would go away, they are all mistaken. It hasn't and it won't.

It is outrageous and irresponsible of Shahrizat to use the Wanita Umno platform for personal gain. The ministers who backed her may have thought that giving her support would detract from the seriousness of the crime. It didn't.

They were enthusiastic about defending Shahrizat but nothing was said about eliminating corruption.

For the police to issue statements to say that there was no criminal breach of trust is also wrong. The job of the police is to investigate. Then, the Attorney-General should decide if a crime has been committed, after evaluating the evidence gathered by the police.

The Umno Youth leader, Khairy Jamaluddin's role is equally suspicious. It later transpired that the project was awarded during his father-in-law's tenure, the former PM, Abdullah Badawi.

The Deputy Prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin had the gall to say that Shahrizat had nothing to do with the project. Even the blind could have seen how ridiculous he looked.

Are husband and wife living on different planets? How would the husband explain the existence of two luxury bungalows in Bangsar to the wife? How does the wife explain her newly acquired Mercedes Benz CLS 350 CGI worth over RM530,000, to her peers?

Naturally Muhyiddin had not much to say about this scandal. The project was approved when he was the Agriculture minister.

For the current Agriculture minister Noh Omar to declare that the NFC project was proceeding well, just proves to everyone, even to the Umno delegates, that either ministers do not read their reports or they simply cannot comprehend what differentiates a well-run project from a badly managed one.

Why is the calibre of our ministers so low? To suggest that our Cabinet is run by a bunch of cowboys would be insulting to the cowboys.

Najib seems to be surrounded by women who have let him down. Perhaps he feels intimidated by them.

The self-styled "First Lady", Rosmah Mansor, kept a low profile during the latest Umno party conference. Najib knows from past experience, the problems that he faced, when he had to defend his wife's alleged misuse of public funds.

He is not free from blame either. Using taxpayers' money to fund personal trips and allocating a tiny portion of his time for official functions, is morally wrong and irresponsible. He has allegedly done this several times in the past, with trips to Perth, Kazakhstan and America.

With ineffective leaders like him, is it any wonder the whole Cabinet is in disarray?

It has been alleged that Dr. Ng Yen Yen, the Tourism minister, has spent vast amounts from the public purse, on setting up a Facebook page and maintaining the social networking site.

She has also allegedly spent RM5 millions on round the world trips, to "promote Malaysian tourism". She has chosen to neglect the basics of promoting tourism at home. Issues like cleanliness, hygiene, public transport and the public being ripped-off, by taxi drivers, have been ignored.

Shahrizat's position is untenable. A few years ago, she announced the formation of a RM15 million slush fund to help Muslim single mothers and divorced wives who did not receive maintenance from their ex-husbands.

The scores of thousands of women who are let down by the syariah system have to share a pitiful RM15 million; Shahrizat's husband and her children can enjoy RM250 million.

It was also alleged that a portion of the NFC funds, had been siphoned off to fund the pilgrimage travel expenses of Shahrizat's husband and son, in 2010. In contrast thousands of elderly Malays cannot even scrape enough money to pay for the most basic package, to go to Mecca. Sadly, several die before they can fulfil this last requirement of going on the haj.

Perhaps, Najib does not know how to deal with his women ministers. It is simple. Treat them as equals. There is nothing to fear. It is not like a domestic environment where he will be "hand-bagged", for daring to speak up.

If Shahrizat has done wrong, then she should be punished for her mistakes. No ifs. No buts.

Delay makes matters worse for Najib. He looks like a lame PM. Inept and indecisive.

People who are angered by Shahrizat's misappropriation of the rakyat's money cannot protest because Najib hides behind his Peaceful Assembly Bill, like a coward.

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