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Najib's praise a testament to Puteri's political mettle

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THE storm that swept Umno earlier this year, which led to the departure of two former party heavyweights, has brought to the fore the growing clout of the 70-year-old party's youngest wing: Puteri.

There is a silver lining to the troubles that had besieged the Pagoh and Semporna divisions, following the exits of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Datuk Seri Mohd Shafie Apdal.

The divisions' Puteri leaders had refused to buckle under intense pressure and leave the party. Their firm stand earned the recognition of party president Datuk Seri Najib Razak in his policy address on Thursday, to illustrate his point that there is a need to maintain party loyalty.

"Muhyiddin was our leader and, of course, someone we knew.

"But, when we saw him standing on the same stage as DAP and PKR leaders against Najib, I told myself, enough is enough," Pagoh Puteri Umno chief Rohaiza Ahmad said yesterday.

"We had a meeting following the



incident. In the end, Puteri made a stand.

"We must stand strong with the party, no matter who the enemy is."

At the opening of the general assembly on Thursday, Najib honoured the Puteri wing, following the tenacity it demonstrated in Pagoh and Semporna.

"Touching on the loyalty of Puteri Umno, I was told by (wing chief) Datuk Mas Ermieyati Samsudin about the Semporna Umno division's Puteri chief, Zakiah Kalipunya, who, when facing the division's crisis, remained loyal and did not leave Umno.

"The same goes for the Pagoh Umno division's Puteri chief, Rohaiza Ahmad, and her team.

"This is the example of true loy-

alty, which we hoped for."

Arguably, for the first time, Puteri has proven its mettle in terms of political resilience, a far cry from the usual condescending tone used when referring to the movement, due to the perception that it is only as good as pink cotton candy — sweet but all fluff.

Puteri leaders and members have been working quietly to provide community and social services.

Bukit Bintang Puteri Umno chief Datin Naszriah Ngasri is well known for organising religious and Arabic-language classes, while exco member Khaidirah Abu Zahar promotes work by local artistes.

While Puteri has scored brownie points for social work, its political track record, following the days of Datuk Seri Azalina Othman Said's debut as the wing's first leader, has been comparatively muted.

"Maybe, we are not politically aggressive enough. This is why some do not take us seriously," said a Tangga Batu Puteri Umno member.

Najib's recognition of Rohaiza and Zakiah should inspire the wing to

make a bigger mark in the party.

The Puteri and Youth wings are demanding that 30 per cent of the candidacy in the next general election be reserved for the young.

Puteri hopes to draw more young professionals in urban areas to its cause, especially in addressing bread-and-butter issues.

"People can say whatever they want, but no one can deny or turn a blind eye to Puteri's contributions to the party.

"Through us, Umno is able to reach out to the younger generation more effectively, especially fence-sitters," said Khaidirah.

The wing is also embarking on a plan to raise its membership from 400,000 to 500,000 next year.

It has 9,000 followers on Twitter and more than 40,000 likes on Facebook. This is not really a bragging point, but it is making headway on social media compared with two years ago.

Puteri should not go only for the numbers, but also ensure that its programmes leave a positive impact on young voters.