

**Telling it as it is till the cows come home**  
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**by Terence Fernandez**

On Thursday afternoon I received a rather angry text from Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz who is currently in London.

She had been informed of Thursday's front-page article in The Malay Mail where she was quoted as urging "tainted" politicians to step aside.

Although she never named anyone, the former Wanita Umno chief was referring to, among others, her successor Datuk Seri Shahrizat Jalil.

That was because we put the question to her.

The Woman, Family and Community Development Minister had been embroiled in a controversy involving the National Feedlot Centre and the National Feedlot Corporation, which is run by her husband and children.

A RM250 million loan using taxpayers' money had come under the microscope following the Auditor-General's Report which had far from flattering things to say about the initiative, which was meant to reduce our dependence on other countries for food.

Rafidah's text, among others, expressed surprise re-garding why her comments on this particular issue were extracted from a three-hour interview and turned into a page one story.

Rafidah, 68, was happily enjoying her retirement and probably regretted granting Azril Annuar and I the interview at her home on Friday the 13th, last month; had she known that she would be thrust back into the political limelight.

In her text, she indicated that she was told that The Malay Mail reported her as "urging Shahrizat to quit".

To be fair, the former Minister of International Trade and Industry never brought up the topic until we asked for her thoughts.

She was her usual feisty self, regaling us about her days as a Cabinet member, talking about where she thinks the country should be headed and wondering how to get us back on track again.

Then came the dreaded question of leaders who find themselves in situations such as Shahrizat finds herself in.

Now, to be fair to us newsmen, the answers were not qualified as off-record; and Rafidah was her usual candid self talking about accountability and how if one loves his or her party, it would be right for that person to move aside if he or she cast a shadow on the party's integrity.

However, never did she mention Shahrizat, who beat her for the Wanita chief's position in 2009.

If one remembers, that was a bitter pill to swallow for Rafidah as she perceived that there was an agreement between hers and Shahrizat's camp, where the former would win uncontested and Shahrizat would take over six months later.

However, as Shahrizat's team felt she could win in her own right, that understanding was set aside and Shahrizat took on her boss — and won.

Back to Rafidah, judging from another text I received yesterday, she feels that she had been inadvertently drawn into a controversy and while we may have been the conduit for re-igniting old fires between these two political adversaries, we make no apologies for asking the questions we asked and reporting her answers to them.

This is, after all, a matter of public interest and we will not apologise for doing our job.

Rafidah's interview will be published soon, and it will perhaps lend some perspective into what she had intended to say, although the meaning was not lost on us in the first article.

People must not be afraid to speak their minds.

And I have a lot of respect for Rafidah, as in spite of the backlash and what she terms as "journalistic over-enthusiasm" on our part, she still stands by her words.

And now, speaking of Shahrizat, it is evident from the responses of a few people to Rafidah's comments that the Iron Lady has become a vehicle for the less courageous to also voice their sentiments for the Wanita chief to quit.

Chief among them is Wanita Umno Deputy Chief Datuk Kamaliah Ibrahim.

Obviously, this call to quit reeks of vested interests, but Shahrizat seems to take it all in stride, telling reporters that as politicians one becomes more spirited when subject to tests.

Personally, I feel sorry for what Shahrizat has to fend off.

It is unfair in a way that she has to answer for something that concerns those close to her.

The NFC, after all does not come under the purview of her Ministry.

And unless there is evidence to the contrary, we cannot say that the NFC was deliberately awarded to her family as a larger network of the well-connected.

But questions abound regarding the choice of recipients; the lack of transparency in awarding it; as well as the questionable purchases of property and a credit card spending spree.

Again, if one were to juxtapose Shahrizat against other leaders whose running of their ministries leaves much to be desired, the former Lembah Pantai MP has little to answer for.

She after all, did not award multi-million ringgit advertising contracts to preferred parties or interfere with the ministry's procurement processes; or have family members work in the shadows of the ministry.

So, why should Shahrizat be the sacrificial lamb when others are allowed to run riot?

Herein lies the dilemma: she had lost in the last elections — was brought in through the "rear door" called the senate — only to earn negative public perception.

So the question is: does she fit the bill of the prime minister's definition of a "winnable candidate".

Instead of keeping a dignified silence and distancing herself from the matter, Shahrizat chose to take the bull by the horns — and that, too, on the platform of the Umno General Assembly.

Worse, she even drew her Umno colleagues into the fray by saying "who among them do not have problems."

Having said that, it is unfair to just focus on Shahrizat, when other leaders have to answer for the perceptions that surround them and their portfolios, too.

Unfortunately, politics is such that — in the words of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad — one has to be "whiter than white"

As Umno Disciplinary Board's Tan Sri Megat Najmuddin Megat Khas opines: "she is guilty by association". It is a politician's hard luck that the standards placed on their shoulders are excessive.

But that's how it is in politics. If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.

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