

Wanita Umno in show of strength for Shahrizat
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KUALA LUMPUR, March 23 — Wanita Umno's backing for Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil appears unshaken despite her deputy's call for her to relinquish the leadership of the wing following allegations she and her family abused a RM250 million federal loan meant for a cattle farming scheme.

A closed-door session between Umno president Datuk Seri Najib Razak and several thousand from the ruling party's women's wing this evening turned into a show of strength for the embattled women, family and community development minister.

If there are supporters of deputy Wanita Umno chief Datuk Kamilia Ibrahim, they were nowhere to be found at the Putra World Trade Centre today, as those wielding placards and banners were fulsome in their calls for Shahrizat to continue leading the 1.3 million-strong wing and representing it in Cabinet.

"If asked, we are willing to stage a protest to call for her to continue as minister," Noriah Apil, a branch leader from Mersing said.

A straw poll by The Malaysian Insider failed to find any Wanita Umno member who backed Kuala Kangsar Umno chief Kamilia, with several instead saying she was weak, incapable and lacking leadership qualities.

"We don't even know who she is or what she can do," said Radiah Rashid, a member from Selayang, adding that Shahrizat's planned exit from Cabinet when her senatorship ends on April 8 would be a "victory for the opposition."

Kamilia's had said earlier this week the public felt something was "morally and politically wrong" with how the National Feedlot Corporation (NFCorp) was run and this was affecting preparations for a general election that must be called by May next year.

"People are poking fun at Wanita and calling us 'cows'. The Wanita grassroots are saying it's difficult to work (for the general election)... As a leader, we have to listen to what the grassroots are saying," she told The Star.

But a deputy branch chief from Penang who only wanted to be known as Makcik Asmah said "our enemies are not outsiders but those from within who try to topple others."

"Kamilia only knows how to badmouth people," another member from Selangor said.

Shahrizat had announced on March 11 she would quit as women, family and community development minister but remain as Wanita Umno chief following over four months of being dogged by the National Feedlot Centre (NFC) scandal.

NFCorp chairman Datuk Seri Mohamad Salleh Ismail, who is Shahrizat's husband, and their three children own the company tasked with running the cattle breeding project that failed to meet targets according to a government audit last year.

The opposition has also accused the family of using a RM250 million federal loan for the project to finance over RM62 million in land, property and expenses unrelated to cattle farming.

Mohamad Salleh pleaded not guilty on March 12 to charges of criminal breach of trust and contravening the Companies Act in relation to RM49 million in public funds.

But Wanita Umno members told The Malaysian Insider "the NFC has no effect."

"We feel Shahrizat is still the best leader and the NFC concerns her family, not her," said Mariam Yusof from Johor.

"I've known Shahrizat for years and I know she and her husband are completely innocent. This is the work of jealous people. She is a leader like no other. She is irreplaceable," a 74-year-old veteran from Kepong said.

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