

In GE13, Wanita Umno fades into the background
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By Dina Zaman

KUALA LUMPUR, April 25 — In every election since before Merdeka, Wanita Umno has been the party's election machinery backbone — the unsung heroes who cook, pound the pavements door to door in their red Skwad Sayang vests, visit the sick and poor.

They are the unseen party workers who work quietly without controversy, until now at least with Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil mired in her family's alleged abuse of public funds and deputy leader Datuk Kamalia Ibrahim who quit the party to contest the May 5 general election.

"Notwithstanding Kamalia's chances (her odds don't look good to me), the way this saga emerged does seem to point to a lack of consultation between Wanita Umno and the people in Umno who are actually calling the shots," Dahlia Martin, a researcher with Flinders University, told The Malaysian Insider.

"There's been a fair bit of lip service to the idea of more women in politics, but not really any bold steps. Which is telling — like I've written (before), women can be courted as voters, but can't call the shots. Quotas should be embraced, UN Women advocates them," she added.

Umno has said it did offer the Bukit Chandan state seat in Perak to Kamalia on the eve of Nomination Day last Saturday, but she sent a thunderbolt through Umno and filed her papers as an independent in the Kuala Kangsar parliamentary seat.

"Depending on who you believe, either way it does not look good for the relationship between Wanita Umno and the supreme council," Dahlia said.

Wanita Umno was once renowned for grooming and producing stellar women leaders and politicians such as the late Tan Sri Aishah Ghani, the charismatic and very sharp Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz, the former minister of international trade and industry, and Datuk Napsiah Omar, to name a few.

Of course, some of these leaders have fought each other and made alliances but by and large, the wing has been united to work for the party's victory in every general election and by-elections.

But none has ever left the party to run as independents, say observers.

"The question is, is Kamalia therefore a mere vanity 'independent' candidate out to revenge against her party? If so, then voters are being taken on a ride. If she really was 'independent', we'd have heard about it long before Nomination Day," said political observer and writer Juana Jaafar.

But Kamalia herself had some tough words to say to her party about her decision to run as an independent.

"The move by BN to sideline me and other women in the wing surprises me. I am dejected as there is no proper recognition of Wanita Umno," she was quoted as saying in the Malay-language newspaper Sinar Harian.

For the record, BN has said that 11 per cent of its candidates for Election 2013 are women although most of the top women leaders are not contesting seats. There are 168 women candidates running for a seat in the May 5 polls, a 40 per cent increase, compared to the 120 candidates who contested in 2008.

“The women’s wing, Jentera Jalinan Rakyat (JR), works on all levels with the fullest commitment. Despite the challenges they faced, and that not everyone becomes a candidate, they are loyal to the party, patient and are not selfish,” Shahrizat said when commenting on Kamilia’s decision over the weekend.

Not taking Kamilia’s challenge lightly, Shahrizat has worked to get her members to campaign for BN in Kuala Kangsar against her former deputy and has roped in BN chairman Datuk Seri Najib Razak to canvass votes tomorrow.

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