Outgoing minister says Wanita Umno in high spirits, tells armchair critics to go to the ground and assess movement's strength

ASRUL HADI ABDULLAH SANI

UNCOWED, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil yesterday took to task Wanita Umno’s armchair critics, telling them to go to the ground before making more allegations about the movement’s strength.

“I think it is important that we are not armchair critics. Come to the ground and talk to Wanita Umno and the leaders. You’ll find out how strong and stable we are. I don’t subscribe to being an armchair critic ... go to the ground.

“Don’t talk from Kuala Lumpur, come visit the branches. Talk to the women and you will know that their spirits are high. I am inviting all my critics to come with me to the ground and be with the people and Wanita Umno,” said the Wanita Umno chief, in an apparent reference to predecessor Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz who had alluded to a weakened women’s wing, following the National Feedlot Centre (NFC) scandal implicating Shahrizat’s family.

The women, family and community development minister was on her final official duty at the Federal Territory mosque, yesterday. Her senatorship expires today. Datuk Seri Najib Razak will head the ministry.

Last month, Shahrizat announced that she was giving up the ministerial post amid a string of allegations of alleged misuse of funds from the NFC managed by her husband and children.

However, her decision to stay as Wanita Umno chief, an elected post, was criticised by Rafidah and her deputy, Datuk Kamilia Ibrahim, who called for her resignation. The wing later closed ranks after a briefing by Najib.

Shahrizat said she refused to be confrontational and considered Kamilia her ‘sister’.

“She is my sister. In politics, you must be prepared for all kinds of challenges. I am not confrontational by nature but I am firm. I know where I want to bring Wanita and I am their chief. Because I am not confrontational, it does not mean that I am weak.”

She said she would not change even though she was no longer a minister and she would also not be dragged into PKR’s dirty politics.

“I am myself and I will always be. From day one, I have always said that we don’t have to scream and shout to send our message across. We don’t have to scream and shout or be rude or insulting to send our message across. It is not necessary. We can do many things. Like at the ministry, we were able to achieve many things without burning our bras or causing any friction with anybody,” she said.

Shahrizat also thanked former prime ministers Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and Najib for trusting her with a ministerial post.

However, she declined to confirm whether she would stand in the coming general election.

“I have not thought anything about that because you do not know what tomorrow brings. But I know one thing for sure, I am going to work very hard to deliver to Datuk Seri Najib a strong and stable Wanita Umno election machinery for Barisan Nasional,” she said.

Shahrizat, however, warned that she was not ready to hang up her gloves.

“Politics has never been a burden for me. It has come so naturally. As a Muslim, Allah decides everything,” she said.

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Another ‘signal’ from Najib

Temporary takeover of Shahrizat’s portfolio a sign elections are near, says political analyst

PRIME MINISTER Datuk Seri Najib Razak taking over the Women, Family and Community Development portfolio is only temporary and is another sign that the general election is near, says a political analyst.

Najib took over the post yesterday when Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil’s tenure as senator ended.

Political analyst Dr Ong Kian Ming told The Malay Mail that should Barisan Nasional (BN) retain the federal government, Najib will appoint someone else.

“I think this is another strong sign from him that elections will be held very soon,” he said.

Ong said most of the interim work at the ministry could be handled by the deputy minister, Datuk Heng Seai Kie, and senior civil servants.

“Although the position is usually handled by women, Najib can adapt his role in the ministry by tying some of his bigger policies which are already in the pipeline, such as BR1M and 1AZAM, to the ministry’s welfare outreach programmes,” he said.

“He can also try to ‘spin’ his new position to show that he prioritises issues that have to do with women, an important voting bloc.

“Najib may have made some token appearances as minister, but there will likely not be enough time to introduce major policy initiatives, like mandating that 30 per cent of board representatives in listed companies be women.”

Asked if there were other more suitable candidates, Ong felt that the prime minister did not want to give the impression that he was giv-
ing the ministry to MCA by appointing Heng as acting minister.

"It would cause unhappiness among the ranks of the members of Wanita Umno," he said. Ong expects the Opposition to paint Najib’s move as showing a "lack of talent", especially of women, within BN.

Dr Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, dean of the School of International Studies at Universiti Utara Malaysia, said for better management of the ministry, someone else should assume the job.

"The Opposition would say that women leaders in the ruling BN government are incompetent, thus the PM had to step in," he said.

"The PM’s post and finance job are already tough and it would be a burden to add another post.

"It is a women’s ministry and should be handled by a woman. Heng can be appointed acting minister.

"There’s nothing much Najib can do in terms of policy, but perhaps use this ministry to strengthen the support of women for the BN government."

Universiti Sains Malaysia’s deputy dean in the School of Social Sciences, Dr P. Sivamurugan, said Najib was not the first man to lead a ministry related to women.

"He’s only interim minister and the ministry is also related to family and society. It’s a challenge, but if he can perform well, he might win women voters’ support," he said.

"As he will be holding three portfolios, the best result will obtained if he has a strong team that is passionate and determined to serve society. He said what mattered most was the end result of policy implementation.

Taking issue with Najib’s decision, PKR Wanita chief Zuraida Kamaruddin said it reflected poorly on the premier’s intention to improve women’s participation in government.

In a statement, yesterday, she described the move as “an insult to women” and a regressive move for women in Malaysia.

“We talk about 30 per cent participation (for women in government) but we are not able to field a women (minister) for the very ministry that should set the example,” she said.

DAP Wanita chief Chong Eng, in a statement, asked if Najib could handle the additional responsibilities.

“This only demonstrates the lack of seriousness of BN towards women empowerment at a time when we are facing stagnated development in terms of gender equality.”
1962: After working in several legal firms since the late 1970s, Shahrizat begins her foray in politics when she is appointed as Wanita Umno Kepong Baru branch chief.


1995: Elected Lembah Pantai MP, a post she held for two consecutive terms. She is also appointed as Sports and Youth Ministry parliamentary secretary.


2000: Chosen as Umno Wanita deputy chief.

2004: Appointed as women development, family and community minister.

Oct 16, 2005-Feb 16, 2006: Appointed acting Federal Territories minister to replace Tan Sri Isa Abdul Samad, who resigned after being found guilty on corruption charges by Umno’s disciplinary board. Datuk Seri Zuhresnan Rafique was later appointed to fill the post.

March 8, 2008: Lost Lembah Pantai parliamentary seat to 27-year-old Nurul Izzah Anwar by 2,885 votes.

March 18, 2008-April 8, 2009: Appointed as special adviser to the prime minister for women and social development affairs.


April 9, 2009: Appointed senator for three-year term.

April 10, 2009: Reappointed women, family and community development minister.

October 2011: Auditor General’s 2010 Report highlights shortcomings of National Feedlot Centre (NFC), managed by Shahrizat’s family, saying only 411 per cent of 2010 target of producing 8,000 head of cattle were produced.

Nov 10, 2011: Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) strategic director Rafizi Ramli begins revealing questionable financial decisions of the National Feedlot Corporation (NFCorp), headed by Shahrizat’s husband, Datuk Seri Dr Mohamad Salleh Ismail, and her three children. Among these allegations is the purchase of local and foreign property, luxury vehicles and land in Putrajaya.

Nov 28, 2011: Shahrizat breaks silence over NFC issue, saying she has nothing to do with the matter.

Jan 13, 2012: Shahrizat goes on three-week leave. She resumes ministerial duties on Feb 6.

Jan 19, 2012: Shahrizat files RM100 million lawsuit against PKR’s Rafizi and Zuraida for defamation.

March 11, 2012: Shahrizat announces resignation as women, family and community development minister when her term as senator ends on April 8. She stays on as Wanita Umno chief.

March 12, 2012: Shahrizat’s husband, Datuk Seri Dr Mohamad Salleh, the executive chairman of NFC, is charged in the KL High Court on two counts of criminal breach of trust involving RM49 million. He is released on a RM500,000 bail in one surety.

April 7, 2012: In a surprise move, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak announces during a function in Temerloh, Pahang, he will take over as acting women, family and community development minister once her senatorship expires.
LAST OFFICIAL DUTY: Shahrizat mingling with students during the Swadaya Mahabbah Tahfiz
1Malaysia programme at the Federal Territory mosque — Pic: SHAHIR OMAR