

## PRIME NEWS

# A brave and wise decision

**STOIC:** Shahrizat's decision will free her to campaign forcefully in the next general election

**A**T the Desa WaterPark in Kuala Lumpur yesterday, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil struck a subdued figure — a stark contrast to the formidable and passionate presence most of the public was used to.

Against a surreal backdrop of overcast skies and surrounded on all sides by young children and reporters, Shahrizat delivered a short and stoic speech announcing her resignation as the women, family and community development minister, effective April 8.

Her decision to step down from the post she has held for 10 of the past 11 years was saddening but ultimately unsurprising.

On Saturday through to early yesterday morning, word was already out that she was ready to relinquish both her ministerial and Wanita Barisan Nasional posts amid growing negative publicity surrounding the National Feedlot Corporation (NFCorp) controversy, in which her immediate family members have been implicated.

Her husband Datuk Dr Mohamed Salleh Ismail serve as executive director as NFCorp while her three children are high-ranking officers in the company, which is involved in an alleged misuse of a RM250 million soft loan from the government.

According to sources close to Shahrizat, it was a last minute telephone call from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, received minutes before her arrival at the waterpark, that persuaded her to stay on as Wanita Umno and BN chief.

A senior Wanita Umno leader



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said Shahrizat had agreed after considering several issues, in particular, the need for the BN's Wanita wings to move forward into the next general election with a strong and charismatic leader.

Other highly-placed sources also pointed out that investigations by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission into Shahrizat's involvement with NFCorp have so far revealed no wrongdoing on her part.

They said Shahrizat felt the pressure placed on her had been unfair — considering that she had not been proven yet to have known or been involved in any way, apart from being married to the man at the centre of the scandal.

In that light, her decision to resign was a brave and wise one.

Far from being an admission of guilt, it was an acknowledgement that to stay on in a crucial election year would have posed a liability to BN and Umno, the party she has served faithfully for 31 years.

For months, her ties to NFCorp alone was opportunity enough for the opposition to launch heavy and repeated attacks on her character, and more broadly, on the BN-led government.

And in the current political climate, the slightest hint of misconduct can cripple decades of commitment and hard work in public service. The longer she stayed, the worse the damage done.

It did not matter that Shahrizat, as some of her supporters have claimed, may simply be a victim of circumstance.

It did not matter if some felt that she could not — and should not — be held responsible for her husband's or her children's actions.

The only thing that mattered was public opinion had it that millions in government loans were not used for their stated purposes. That one family, with ties to the government, appeared to have spent more than they earned.

In the end, in Shahrizat's own words, "stepping down was simply the right thing to do", not just by the public but by her family as well.

"My aim has always been to serve the people, and I have always been happy in discharging my duties. But I am not only a leader, I am a wife and mother, too."

Her impending resignation roiled the opposition of campaign fodder for use against the government while keeping her in the limelight as a formidable campaigner.

Freed of her minister's duties, Shahrizat will be itching to lead the charge against the opposition — she has done most recently by challenging Parti Keadilan Rakyat women's chief, Zuraida Kamarudin, to pressure party president Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail to resign over the controversies surrounding Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

She may have lost the battle of current public opinion, but Shahrizat's innate talents and decades of experience are qualities that can easily bring her back from the brink.

Certainly, they will serve her well in a familiar role as the strong-willed leader of the women's wing — the heart of BN's campaign machinery — in the general election.



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