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Women's Political Representation: Progressing in Malaysia?

By Piya Sukhani

SYNOPSIS

While female political representation has increased under the Pakatan Harapan (PH) administration, progress remains slow and women are still impeded from advancing towards roles of leadership.

COMMENTARY

THE POLITICAL earthquake in Malaysia that brought Pakatan Harapan (PH) into power on 9 May 2018 also shattered the glass ceiling for women in government. PH outperformed its predecessor, Barisan Nasional (BN), in appointing more female politicians in the cabinet and across key institutions.

Malaysia saw its first female chief justice, Tengku Maimun Tuan Mat; first female deputy prime minister (DPM), Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail; and first female anti-corruption chief commissioner, Latheefa Koya. Including the deputy premier, PH has five female ministers (Zuraida Kamaruddin, Teresa Kok, Yeo Bee Yin, and Rina Harun) and four female deputy ministers (Hannah Yeoh, Teoh Nie Ching, Fuziah Salleh, and Isnaraissah Munirah Majilis), who hail from the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the Sabah Heritage Party (Warisan).

Advancing on Gender Equality?

This is certainly significant progress for gender equality, especially in an Asian society that remains largely conservative. Notwithstanding, this progress is insufficient, going by the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

As of 2019, Malaysia ranks 143rd out of 190 countries on women's representation in national parliament, according to IPU. In ASEAN, Malaysia stands third from the bottom, above Myanmar and Brunei. Notably, Malaysia has been one of the longest stable democracies with regular parliamentary elections in ASEAN.

In the 2018 general election, both PH and BN did not disregard the importance of women in politics. Their manifestos pledged to uphold a 30 percent quota of female representation in federal and state governments. However, this stands as yet another unfulfilled promise of Pakatan Harapan.

Women's political representation is crucial for Malaysia's aspirations to become a high-income nation that is inclusive and democratic. As a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Malaysia is also obliged to accelerate the increase of its low female representation in politics.

Political Leadership & Gender Balance in Malaysia

Women's political leadership is critical for gender equality and social justice, as they more often voice and address issues relating to women and families. The benefits extend to broader society. Studies illustrate that a gender balance in the political domain promotes gender balance in the workforce, which increases GDP growth. Female political leaders are also likely to place higher budget allocations for health and education.

Additionally, research by the UN Women has demonstrated that women at negotiation tables tend to increase cooperation across ethnic lines and political parties, champion social issues, and resolve national crises without resorting to violence.

In Malaysia, there has been a positive trend in the fielding of women candidates, albeit a slight one. The proportion of women candidates nominated in the 2013 general election was at 10.7 percent. This figure rose to 14.4 percent in the 2018 general election – BN fielded 92 female candidates out of the total 727 contested, PH fielded 85 out of the total 660, and PAS fielded 36 out of the total 548.

In February 2017, then deputy prime minister, Zahid Hamidi, suggested that the push for women's representation had been rhetorical all along, stating: "I will find a way so that this 30 percent request is achieved. Enough of talking rhetorically." But the transition from rhetoric to implementation continues to be a complex process.

Challenges for Female Political Progression

Voluntarily adopting the 30 percent quota would mean all political parties have to nominate sufficient female candidates. However, the current overwhelming majority of male incumbents are expectedly reluctant to yield their seats to women.

Since the nomination process is opaque and predominantly controlled by male gatekeepers, the mechanisms of how candidates are selected within parties pose challenges for women. Women politicians have observed that it is not rare for male politicians to curb the nomination of women.

In most cases of women parliamentarians, such as those in UMNO, PAS, PBB, PKR, and DAP, they have indeed been sifted by these male gatekeepers. It is not unusual for these women to be beholden to their male patrons. In fact, a number of these women have echoed disapproval of the 30 percent quota.

According to them, such quotas are undemocratic. They believe that women who appeal to be fielded on the grounds of their sex are not incentivised to legitimately compete on their merit. Some female political elites, on the other hand, have adopted the practice of women-centric clientelism to disrupt the monopoly of male gatekeepers. Senior female politicians allocate positions and resources to their female protégés in exchange for their political loyalty.

However, there are only a few women in state and federal cabinets, thus few have access to the patronage networks and can engage in clientelism. In any case, patronage politics is inherently problematic and does not comprehensively tackle the issue.

As reported by several women MPs, the electoral system is another impediment to raising the number of female political leaders. Elections in Malaysia follow the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system. Constituencies are divided among members of a coalition. These component parties can only contest a limited number of constituencies.

Hence, as limited candidates can be fielded, parties tend to favour experienced incumbents to win the seats, who are usually male. This promotes the status quo of male dominance.

Feasible Solutions?

To promote inclusive representation, PH called for electoral reform during the 2018 general election; there are also debates to replace the FPTP electoral system with proportional representation (PR). The PR system enables a party to field multiple candidates in multi-member constituencies. Research shows that PR is effective in increasing the likelihood of more elected women.

However, this reform is an ambitious long-term goal at best. In the short term, the measure of a “women-only-additional-seats” (WOAS) within the FPTP system is the least contentious and arguably the most politically viable route of accelerating women’s political representation.

WOAS provides non-constituency seats and proportionally allocates them after elections to all parties, based on their share of votes. Appointed female members each receive a seat at the state assembly. This does not threaten the seats of male incumbents.

The constitutions of certain states in Malaysia allow for this special provision. Such allocations hold potential for upholding representation from minority groups. For states that do not have these provisions, amendments can be debated and passed at state assemblies, without the need for these bills to be tabled in the federal parliament.

30 Percent Quota?

This is unlike enforcing the legislation of a minimum 30 percent quota of female candidates for federal and state elections that requires a constitutional amendment in the federal parliament, and a two-thirds majority to pass.

The WOAS was implemented in Terengganu in November 2018, with the appointment of the state's first woman assemblyman, Zuraida Noor, who was secretary of the women's wing of PAS. Before this, the state executive committee was consistently an all men's line-up.

The WOAS measure can help to highlight the value and capability of female leaders. However, it should only be explored as a temporary measure, rather than a substitute for equal representation.

Women's political representation will likely increase in the next election, but political leaders, both men and women, and the government need to take more proactive steps to enhance the size and quality of this representation.

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