

International IDEA, 2002, Women in Parliament, Stockholm (<http://www.idea.int>). This is an English translation of Wan Azizah, "Perempuan dalam Politik: Refleksi dari Malaysia," in International IDEA, 2002, *Perempuan di Parlemen: Bukan Sekedar Jumlah*, Stockholm: International IDEA, pp. 191-202. (This translation may vary slightly from the original text. If there are discrepancies in the meaning, the original Bahasa-Indonesia version is the definitive text).

## Case Study

### Women in Politics: Reflections from Malaysia

Wan Azizah

Women constitute half of humanity, and it follows that any decision-making, whether at the personal, family, societal or public levels, should be mindful of and involve the participation of women in the making of those decisions. Women's political, social and economic rights are an integral and inseparable part of their human rights. Democracy is an inclusive process, and therefore in a functioning democracy, the points of view of different interest groups must be taken into account in formulating any decision. The interest and opinions of men, women and minorities must be part of that decision-making process.

Yet far from being included in the decision-making process, women find themselves under-represented in political institutions. Numerous challenges confront women entering politics. Among them are lack of party support, family support and the "masculine model" of political life. Many feel that Malaysian society is still male dominated, and men are threatened by the idea of women holding senior posts. In the political sphere this is compounded by the high premium placed on political power. This makes some men even less willing to share power with women. Based on the Malaysian experience, this case study will explore some of the obstacles that hinder the participation of women in parliament, and propose strategies that may be used to overcome them.

#### ***The Malaysian Context***

Malaysia is a federation of thirteen states and three federal territories. Nine of the states are headed by sultans, the other four by governors appointed by the king, known as *Yang Dipertuan Agong* (YDPA). The YDPA is elected from among the sultans by the Council of Rulers made up of the sultans themselves. The position is rotated among them for a five-year term. The YDPA rules with the advice of the prime minister and the sultans rule in their various states with the advice of their chief ministers. Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy that follows a system of parliamentary democracy. The prime minister and chief ministers are elected by the people through general elections held regularly every five years. The current YDPA is the twelfth since the nation's independence on 31 August 1957. At independence the nation was made up of eleven states<sup>1</sup> and was called the Federation of Malaya. In 1963, Sabah and Sarawak joined the Federation to form the Federation of Malaysia.

Women constitute over 50 percent of Malaysia's 23 million people. Famed as a multi-ethnic country, rich in its variety of cultures, Malaysia's population is made up of more than 30 ethnic groups<sup>2</sup>. Less than eight percent of the population was classified as living below poverty line before the 1997 economic crisis; the literacy rate is above 85 percent and life expectancy is comparable to developed countries. It has a bicameral parliamentary system composed of a lower house (*Dewan Rakyat*) and upper house (*Dewan Negara*). While members of the Dewan Rakyat are elected, members of the Dewan Negara are appointed either by the states or directly by the YDPA acting on the advice of the prime minister.

The National Front (Barisan Nasional or BN), a coalition of about fifteen political parties established in 1974 in the aftermath of 13 May 1969 racial riots, forms the government. BN's core members, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), that earlier formed the Alliance Party (1955-1974), have been at the helm of the government since the country's independence. While BN dominates Malaysian mainstream politics and the parliament with an almost unbroken record of two-thirds majority or more, the nation has credible opposition parties, including the *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS), Democratic Action Party (DAP), *Parti Rakyat Malaysia* (PRM) and since 1999, *Parti keADILan Nasional* (keADILan).

## **Women in Malaysian Politics**

In 2002, Malaysia had three women in full ministerial positions: the Minister of Women and Family Development, the Minister of International Trade and Industry and the Minister of Welfare and National Unity. In addition, women occupy other significant governmental posts that include deputy ministers, political secretaries, diplomats, senior civil servants, elected members of various state assemblies, and senators in the Dewan Negara. In the Dewan Rakyat, there are now 20 women members of parliament, out of 193 total members. If the number of elected women MPs is an indicator, there has been a slow improvement in the status and position of women in Malaysian politics.

Nevertheless, the presence of women in Malaysia's decision making process is still far from satisfactory. Some women leaders have talked of gender parity in this context. And for the time being, women still find themselves under-represented in Malaysian political institutions.

**Table 1: Women Members of Parliament in Malaysia from 1955 to 1999**

Election Year	1955	1959	1964	1969	1974	1978	1982	1986	1990	1995	1999
Total Parliamentary Seats	52	104	104	144	154	154	154	177	180	192	193
Women MPs	1	3	3	2	5	7	8	7	11	15	20
%	2.00	2.90	2.90	1.38	3.25	4.54	5.19	3.95	6.11	7.80	10.36

Source: Rashila Ramli. 2000. "Modernisasi Politik: Ke Arah Keseimbangan Gender dalam Penyertaan Politik?" In Abdul Rahman Embong (ed.), *Negara, Pasaran dan Pemodenan Malaysia*. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, pp. 198-213.

***There are at least five factors that form obstacles to Malaysian women's active participation in politics: subliminal discrimination against women; time constraints; the notion that "a woman's place is at home"; natural apathy and aversion to political involvement and lack of adequate resources.***

According to Rashila and Saliha<sup>3</sup> there are at least five common factors which form obstacles to Malaysian women's active participation in politics. They classify the factors as, social discrimination against women's roles in the public domain, time constraints due to career and domestic demands, cultural and religious arguments that a woman's place is in the home, structural constraints within each political party that do not allow women to advance beyond a certain level, and lack of adequate resources in terms of organizational support, personal influence and finance. Contrary to popular misperceptions, an understanding of Islamic concepts leads one to appreciate the liberating possibilities afforded by the teachings of the religion. In many cases, religion has empowered and enabled women to reach their full potential and capabilities just as much as men. The experience of Malay women at the turn of the last century is a case in point.

### ***Muslim Women and 'Reformasi'***

In the past, Malay women have been active in the public sphere. Che Siti Wan Kembang was a female ruler of the state of Kelantan on the east coast of peninsular Malaysia in the seventeenth century. History tells us that Malay women were also rulers of the kingdom of Aceh.<sup>4</sup> For example, Ratu Shafiuddin, the daughter of Sultan Iskandar Thani, ascended to the throne after the death of her husband, Sultan Iskandar Muda. In fact, Aceh was ruled by a succession of queens for the next fifty years. On the islands of Maluku and Sulawesi, there were other Malay women rulers.

A century ago, Muslim reformers like Syed Sheikh Al Hadi, Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin and their contemporaries in the progressive Islamic movement - popularly known as the Kaum Muda - spread the idea that Malay Muslim girls should receive the best of modern education along with the boys.<sup>5</sup> Although initially these ideas encountered some opposition from the more conservative minded, Malay society in general embraced this suggestion with open arms. Thus, even before independence, Malay Muslim society adopted this liberal attitude towards its women and an open atmosphere which encouraged education and the role of women in the public sphere. Since then, we have had women in the civil service and in the corporate sector who have attained senior positions.

Therefore, unlike other societies, there does not appear to be confusion or significant conflict in terms of the roles played by women in Malaysia. Our society has been fortunate in that we had these visionary scholars and intellectuals

who opened up avenues for women more than a century ago. In many cases, Islam has empowered and enabled women to reach their full potential and capabilities just as much as men. In fact, in Malaysia the most politicized and politically active group of women has always been the Malay Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

After independence, the first Malaysian woman to become a minister was Fatimah Haji Hashim, who was appointed to be Minister for Welfare by the country's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. Since then, women have tended to be assigned either to ministries seen as "suitable" to their roles, such as the Ministry of Welfare or the Ministry of Women and Family Development, or to junior ministries such as Culture, Youth and Sports, now realigned to become the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Arts.<sup>7</sup>

The only woman who has been given a senior ministerial post is Rafidah Aziz who was appointed Minister of International Trade and Industry in 1987. Even now, the proportion of women ministers or deputies, compared to men, is very small, and still far behind the developed world.<sup>8</sup>

There is no quota system in Malaysia to increase women's political representation. At the party level, women are only beginning to take up important positions. In the ruling party UMNO, there is only one elected woman member out of the about forty members on its supreme council, while Parti keADILan has eight women elected its leadership council. Besides the eight women leaders elected to the policymaking body of keADILan (including the president and the treasurer), two keADILan state committees (in Sabah and Sarawak) are also headed by women.<sup>9</sup>

However, what is more important is that the dual political and economic crises of September 1998,<sup>10</sup> acted as a catalyst in galvanizing the latent public mood for reform (*reformasi*). These events also helped sensitize women to take a more active interest in the country's social, economic and political domains. This is proven by the active role of women in the reformasi movement since that year. Women have clearly played at least an equal role with men in activating programs carried out in the quest for change.

***Women played an important and active role in the reform movement, sensitizing them to become more active in participating in the country's social, economic and political issues.***

Over the past three years, we can see the continuing role played by women in sustaining the endeavors for a more open, just, and equitable society. The vigor with which they are carrying out these efforts disproves the often quoted cliché that women are fickle and easily swayed. The sheer perseverance and tenacity of women in this struggle has in fact resulted in a very natural bonding or synergy in generating strength and enthusiasm to work towards a fairer and more just society and government in Malaysia.

As part of this effort, it is necessary to establish an alternative agenda that includes enabling women to maximize their potential in contributing to their personal well-being and to the development of their society. It is necessary to create an alternative forum that goes beyond tokenism that does not just use women as an accessory of the political machinery to bring in the votes during elections. If women are enabled to maximize their potential, they will be able to contribute to the empowerment of all citizens in society. This can happen without denigrating the social, cultural or religious obligations that are part of every woman's life.

While women's positions in politics are one aspect contributing to development, it is important to remember the role women play in other sectors of society. Malaysia's experience has shown that any discussion on the role of women in politics cannot be confined to only representation in formal institutions. A great number of women, after having pursued their education to tertiary levels, choose to become homemakers. Although they may not be occupying formal positions commensurate with their training, they are also contributing to the development of society by bringing up their children and family in a more enlightened environment.

The common definitions of democracy and politics generally do not lend themselves to a woman-friendly approach. The linking of ideas of democracy and gender is still an arena that needs to be further explored.

### ***Obstacles Faced by Women in Parliament***

The numerous problems facing women who enter politics in Malaysia deters many from political involvement.

#### ***Dual Burden***

Women themselves are less assertive and often have to shoulder additional burdens, juggling domestic responsibilities and career concerns thereby making it hard for any but the most determined to succeed. However, a more relaxed

attitude is discernable among the younger generation and men now appear to be more willing to see women as partners in both the domestic and professional spheres. Since political leaders tend to be middle-aged, it will perhaps be some years before this change is reflected at the highest levels of politics.

### ***Political Parties***

The nature of political parties also hinders the political involvement of women. In general, it can perhaps be observed that the comfortably entrenched parties tend to adhere to more conservative attitudes, failing to see and adapt to the fairly radical changes taking place in society. It is the more dynamic alternative or opposition parties that have on the whole given greater opportunity to women. Also, many political parties have few resources to devote to training and education, including for women, because of the multiple pressures applied by those in authority.

### ***Deterring Environment for Women***

It is sad to note that female MPs and women representatives in the various state assemblies still face sexual harassment in the form of disparaging remarks and offensive jokes made during parliamentary or state assembly sessions. There has been no effective action taken to ameliorate such abusive practices and both female and male members of parliament have not been successful in making any concerted effort to change the situation. Another reason keeping women away from politics is that they often consider it as a male realm, and are often daunted by the hypocrisy and "dirty game" of politics.

### ***Strategies to Open Access for Women in Politics***

Considering the conditions above, it is necessary to explore the strategies that women employ to access the public sphere in the context of a patriarchal socio-political system. There are women who have been successful in subverting the boundaries of gender, and in operating in a very aggressive male-dominated sphere. Could other women learn from this example? It is important to note that many of the women who have been successful come from a background in the political elite. Their background and class is perhaps the most important factor in their successful inclusion into the political system. We can, however, examine whether socio-political movements provide opportunities for women to use certain strategies that might be able to subvert the gender hierarchy in politics.

Certain forms of support within the society are important for the development of women's role in politics, and there are already many success stories of this type.

The most important is political awareness. Muslim women who had until recently been relatively invisible in the public sphere are suddenly filling up meeting halls and organising campaigns for women's rights, civil rights, human rights, and for democracy. Prominent among them were women from the *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM), *Jemaah Islah Malaysia* (JIM) and various civil society NGOs like *Tenaganita* and *Suaram*.

The second is education, which provides the core of informed and competent female opinion. Thirdly, there are now many women holding senior positions in the country's civil service. This has ensured women's input in the planning and implementation of government policy.

Many of the NGOs aligned themselves with keADILan, and by extension, the Alternative Front (Barisan Alternatif or BA), which is a coalition of opposition parties -keADILan, PAS, DAP and PRM - in the fiercely contested 1999 general elections. *Hajjah Zainon Jaafar* (ABIM), *Fuziah Salleh* (JIM), *Irene Fernandez* (Tenaganita) and *Zaiton Kasim* (Women's Candidacy Initiative) were picked to contest on the BA platform. Such alignment between civil society activists and political parties has come to be regarded as a feature of "new politics" in Malaysia post-1998.

***It is also important to remember that we should look beyond the often asked question of how to increase the numbers of women in parliament, and move towards presenting examples and experiences of how women can impact on the political process while working through a parliamentary structure.***

Malaysia, like any other country, needs to have balanced male/female representation in the public sphere, including politics, so that women can participate in high-level decision-making. Having women at the highest levels of decision-making not only means the articulation of issues generally perceived to be women's issues, but ensures that the interests and needs of women, who are half of the population, are given due weight and consideration. Beyond that, the presence of women at these levels will mean that women's perspectives will be easier to hear and more highly valued in national discussions, in the direction of creating a more just, open, fair and equitable society. Without a sufficiently visible, if not

proportionate, presence in the political system - i.e. "threshold representation" - a group's ability to influence either policy-making, or indeed the framing of political culture, is limited.

## ***A Political Credo***

On a personal note, I would like to end by mentioning that I never aspired nor dreamed that I would be occupying my current position, in helping to bring about change in society. Some commentators have mentioned that it is a unique position, borne out of exceptional circumstances that befell the country when the cataclysmic events of 1998 gave rise to a public outcry for reform.

The experience in Malaysia has shown that women tend to take a greater interest in politics in times of crisis. Certainly, Malaysian women have responded strongly to the events surrounding the political persecution of leaders of the opposition. One of the most gratifying aspects of keADILan's popularity is that a substantial proportion of its supporters are women. As daughters, sisters, wives and mothers, they could readily empathize with the victims of abuses. As an "accidental" politician, I share the view that the struggle for justice must be continued even outside the sanctioned perimeters of elections held once every five years.

The cause of justice must be fought for vigorously at all times so as to create ultimately a government and society that is not only just but that provides dignity to the people. Although my journey into politics was not a deliberate and concerted plan, everyone has the right to use the arena of electoral politics to promote their cause. My cause is justice, especially for women, and for the disenfranchised and other marginalized groups in society. I sincerely believe in what the great sages have said throughout history, that the journey of a thousand miles starts with the first step. A Chinese proverb has it that a mountain is made up of many pebbles and that the ocean consists of millions of drops of water. In short, whatever the adversities and obstacles placed in our paths, Malaysia's women will answer with the universal chorus of common humanity: we shall overcome.

## ***Endnotes***

1. The states are Perlis, Kedah, Pulau Pinang, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor, Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan.
2. 61 percent are indigenous Malay (*bumiputra*), i.e. 50 percent Malays on peninsular Malaysia who are Muslims while the other 11 percent are Malays from Sabah and Sarawak, of whom some are Muslim but many are Christians and animist. Thirty percent are Chinese, nine percent are Indians and other mainly non-Muslim.
3. Rashila Ramli and Saliha Hassan. 1998. "Trends and Forms of Women's Participation in Politics." In Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan (ed.), *Malaysian Women In The Wake Of Change*. Kuala Lumpur: Gender Studies Programme, Universiti Malaya. Pp. 88-104.
4. Aceh is now part of Indonesia, on the island of Sumatra, but was a powerful Malay state before the colonial period.
5. These men were notable religious scholars and modernist intellectuals who had received their education at the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo. While they were in Cairo, they came into contact with the reformist and universalist ideas of, among others, Muhammed Abduh, Rashid Ridha and Jamaluddin al-Afghani.
6. In the period leading to national independence in 1957 these included Shamsiah Fakeh who led the *Angkatan Wanita Sedar* (AWAS) towards the end of the Japanese Occupation until it was proscribed by the British in 1948, and others in UMNO's women's wing such as Khatijah Sidek, Ibu Zain, Aishah Ghani and Fatimah Hj Hashim. Fatimah was the first woman minister in independent Malaya.
7. The ministers are: Welfare - Fatimah Hj. Hashim, Aishah Ghani, Napsiah Omar (Deputy Minister); Ministry of Women and Family Development - Shahrizat Jalil; Culture, Youth and Sports - Rosemary Chong – Deputy Minister, which has now realigned to become the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Arts - Ng Yen Yen – Deputy Minister.
8. It also appears that the women appointed to executive positions in the government are seen as having been rewarded for securing the support of women voters. In other words, the appointment of some women is not seen as based on their personal qualities or professional capabilities.
9. Dato' Hafshah Harun (a former State Minister) and Datin Saidatul Badru (the daughter of a former Chief Minister and Governor) are the leaders for keADILan in Sarawak and Sabah respectively.
10. This includes Anwar Ibrahim's abrupt dismissal from his position as deputy minister, and his physical assault two weeks later by the Inspector General of Police, while he was blindfolded and had his hands handcuffed behind his back.