

Gender Think Piece: Malaysian Women's Entry into Politics

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A. An Overview of Women and Politics

In the pursuit of democratic governance, women's inclusion in the politics is an explicit outcome of political liberalisation. Historically, the evolution of women in development has played a prominent role in supporting women's involvement in politics. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BFPA), launched in 1995 has placed women's political empowerment on the international policy agenda.

The *critical mass theory* suggests that the more women representatives there are, the greater the chances that women's perspectives will be presented and considered on all policy matters (Ballington J, 2009). The Inter-Parliamentary Union Survey (2009) shows how the political priorities of women parliamentarians have made an impact to the different policy areas in women's issues; gender equality matters; social community matters; family related and education. Some criticisms¹ have focused on its failure to deliver critical changes for women's rights in terms of legislative or resource allocations. Others have drawn to the fact that superficial efforts to increase the number of women in politics offer no real qualitative influence; and it unlikely to produce any immediate benefits. However, none of these criticisms suggest that women's political participation is not an effective route towards democratic governance.

In a political context dominated by the majoritarian or better known as first-past-the post electoral system, critics have argued that Malaysian women have a lesser probability of being nominated on a party ticket. The fact that the absence of quota system (*sic*) and the low participation of women are still not perceived to be the result of systematic discrimination, but rather as "personal realities" faced by women (Jalušič V and Antić M. G (2001). Despite the continuous emphasis by the Malaysian national civil societies and the UN agencies on the importance of opening up spaces for women to participate in politics, there is still significant under-representation of women elected as political representatives in the recent 13th Malaysia General Election.

Unlike its previous elections, an important feature of the election results is characterised by increased polarisation. In my view, from the perspective of gender, it re-defines the way in which, most women candidates were elected. It became clear that electorates voting patterns were narrower and voted based on partisan-labelship and had lesser focus on constituency candidacy. Candidates' choice was therefore dependent on which political ideology one is supporting for, rather than a specific deliberation if a candidate was a man or a woman. This fundamental change, in my opinion, presented a greater opportunity for many more women to be elected in this election, should some political parties had increased the numbers of its women candidates. This paper proceeds as follows. The second part provides a brief historical background of Malaysian women's involvement in politics, focusing on the barriers than hinders

¹ Waring, M. (2010), *Women's Political Participation*, The Institute of Public Policy, Auckland University of Technology. New Zealand.

women's participation in general and the quota system. The third section describes the recent 13th General Election result and an analysis of the outcomes for women. The final part concludes with a further emerging questions and issues which demand attention.

B. Malaysian women working it out on the ground

Historically, Malaysia had its first women's minister, Tan Sri Fatimah Hashim in 1969. While there has been a relatively clear Federal Constitutional framework regulating women's standing for election in Malaysia, the enforcement of Article 8 (2) was rarely debated until the late 1990s. The movement for women's political representation only began to pick up its momentum and visibility in 1999 with the establishment of Women's Candidacy Initiatives (WCI)². It was endorsed by 76 organisations to open up more spaces for women to involve in politics. It was to take women's issues to the political level as well as to gain experience in politics without the impediment of party structures.

As the central tenet of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) that Malaysia ratified in 1995, women's participation in political and in public life have been taken as one of the indicatives of the extent to which the country is promoting women's empowerment in totality. A major obstacle to this treaty in making a meaningful contribution to women's political representation is non-compliance, when there are no legal sanctions Malaysia or any other countries for non-compliance.

According to the *Women in Parliaments: World Classification* by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, in 2013, Malaysia ranks 110 out of 139 countries; on the same ranking as Cote d' Ivoire. In the 12th Malaysian Parliament, women have attained 10.4% of Dewan Rakyat (lower house of the Parliament) and occupy 16.9% of Dewan Negara (upper house of the Parliament). It is widely acknowledged that women are under-represented in politics and public life. At the time of writing, the new line up of the cabinet list for the 13th Malaysian Parliament has yet to be released.

Malaysia has faced a range of challenges to promote women's entry into politics. Chin-Abdullah, in her publication *Expanding Democracy, Enlarging Women' Space* (2005), builds her case around the argument that political space for women is limited by democratic boundaries and institutionalised patriarchal values in state machineries and political parties. Much of the literature relating to factors affecting Malaysian's women's political participation highlighted that women have unequal access to financial resources to carry out political work. Negative images and stereotype roles as to how women politicians are often portrayed in media further restrain women from involving in politics.

Within this wider context, there has been extensive debate about the special measures of quota allocation and under what conditions it should be applied. UNDP and NDI (2012) define quota as "*a way of guaranteeing that members of electorate group, such as women, are included at a prescribed minimum level in representative institutions*". It's one of the policy approaches to increase the numbers of women in politics.

Some believe that taking on such a step risks undermining the principle of meritocracy, while others believe that the need is sufficiently great to facilitate access to those who have lesser

² The objectives of the WCI are to a) increase the awareness of the general public about women's concerns and needs regarding more equitable attitudes, policies and laws b) promote the participation of the general public especially women in decision making and electoral processes c) support women into decision making positions and to hold office in the democratic process in Parliament in the government-source cited from "*Politics in Malaysia: The Malay Dimension*" by Edmund Terence Gomez et. al (2007)

opportunity. It has elicited strong opinions on both sides of the debate. Many feminists' organisations view quota as positive and necessary. From this point of view, quotas are viewed as a way of compensating for the steep barriers that keep women out of politics, especially at the higher levels (UNDP, 2010). Women and men face different risks and have different capacities and resources on which to draw to respond and cope. It is not about taking power from some groups to give it to others, but it's about distributing power more evenly and ensuring a better access for those who has lesser opportunities.

Others have argued against the quota system, believing that it goes against the principle of democracy and equal opportunities for all. The approach risks of electing candidates based on gender instead of qualifications; in a manner that may conflict with and undermining meritocracy. This thus, prevents more qualified candidates from being elected. Quotas are viewed as the maximum rather than the minimum (UNDP, 2010). There is evidently a risk that women politician may not be different from men. Women politicians may not use the leverage within the political system to advance women's issues; to address inequalities and eliminates biases in public policy and processes that deepen exclusion of women. Which of these opposing views is the case will depend upon how well the new governance will address the range of political and practical challenges that emerge.

C. Women Political Participation in the Malaysia 13th General Election

Nomination of Women's Candidates

Over the last five years, the numbers of women nominated as candidates for the Malaysia 13th General Election have increased from 120 to 168, according to the statistics provided by the Malaysian Election Commission (EC).

Women's nomination at parliamentary levels went from 37 in 2008 to 56 in 2013. At state assembly level, there is also increased women's candidates' nomination from 91 in 2008 to 112 in 2013. While there has been progress made, one important indicative of this figure is that it's a disproportionate representation of the total number of nominated candidates. Women were 8.8% (168/1900 candidates) of the electoral candidates. This is unlikely to mirror the population makeup of women in this country, who comprised 48.6 %³ of the total population.

Nominated candidates by political parties

Table 1

Type of Seat	Barisan Nasional ⁴	Pakatan Rakyat ⁵	Independent
Parliament	22	22	12
State Assembly	49	55	12
Total seat	71	77	24

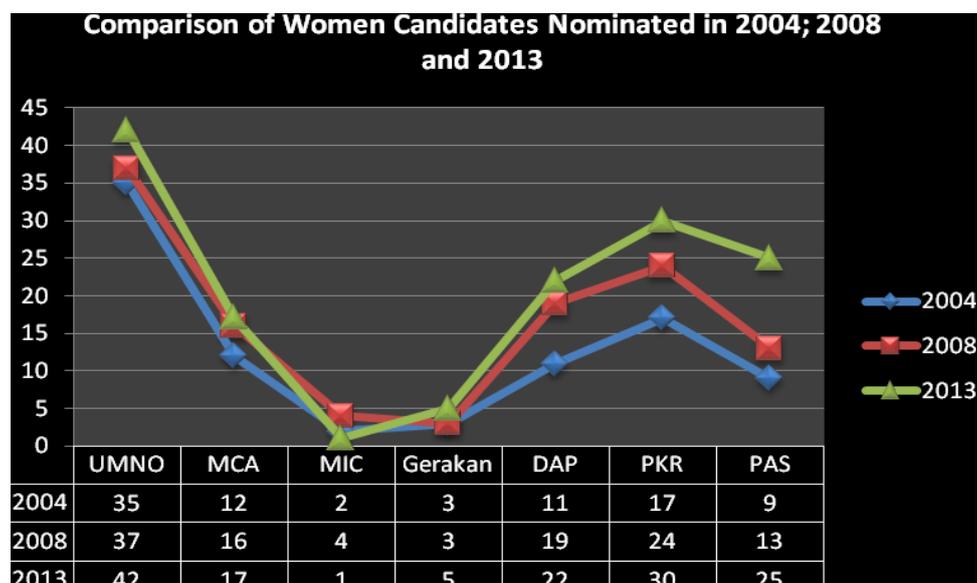
Source: Statistics by Soon Joon Wai (Malaysiakini), April 24th, 2013

³ According to the Department of Statistics in Malaysia, in 2012, the country had a population of 29,336.8 million people of whom 14,243.1 million were women and girls

⁴ Barisan Nasional (BN), a major political coalition formed by UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), MCA (the Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress)

⁵ Pakatan Rakyat (PR), an opposition informal political coalition. It was formed by Democratic Action Party (DAP), Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)

Pakatan Rakyat (PR) nominated 55 women compared to BN's 49 for state assembly seats. And at parliamentary level, both BN and PR had 22 candidates each. The rest were independents⁶.



Source: Statistics by Soon Joon Wai (Malaysiakini), April 27th, 2013

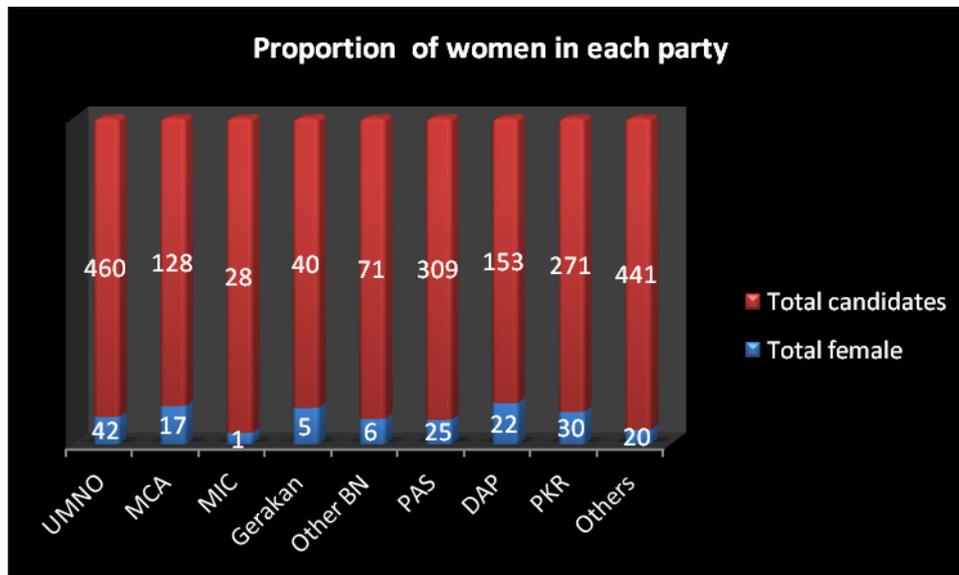
As shown in the above table, PR may be viewed as a political coalition that does take up the potential contributions for expanding the political space for women in Malaysia. One notable trend shows that more women candidates are being nominated by Pakatan Rakyat (DAP, PKR & PAS) over the past elections. For BN (UMNO, MCA, MIC) progress has been slow even since the obligations to increase women's participation were made in 1995 through the ratification of CEDAW. While UMNO was the first political party to involve women in politics and Welsh (2013), points out that over the years, UMNO, MCA and MIC women leaders have either been marginalised or scandalised. More telling, however, is Welsh (2013)'s observation that the "decline at the top of the BN corresponds to less influence in all of the main coalition parties, except in Gerakan".

It is interesting to note that PAS has the biggest increase of women candidates over the past elections. The observation also revealed that a perceived Muslim political party, PAS, have no qualms about supporting women in politics, thus negating the stereotype often associated with religious constraint.

Along with comparing the number of women candidates nominated by political parties against one another, an important component of the analysis is to look at the ratio of women's representation in each political party. The existing development may not necessarily correspond closely with women's political equality. While political parties have taken the approach of increasing women candidates, *inter-alia*, changes in the seat allocations to garner sufficient support from electorates, it would indeed be most unfortunate as the changes lead to a greater under-representation of women.

This graph shows women's representation across all the political parties.

⁶ Malaysia Insider, 20 April, 2013, "More Women Contesting in GE 13, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/more-women-contesting-in-ge13>



Source: Statistics by Soon Joon Wai (Malaysiakini), April 24th, 2013

No political party has achieved parity between women and men in the current 13th General Election nomination. These shortfalls occur across all political parties who are contesting in the election. DAP has the highest number of women's nominated candidates; 14.4% of its total candidates are women. The next is MCA on whose candidate lists, women make up of 13.3% of its total candidatures. This is followed by Gerakan 12.5 %; PKR (11.1%); UMNO (9.1%) and PAS (8.1%). MIC has the lowest representation of women (3.5%). A closer look at the figures, however, indicates that the pattern seems more likely to be that every party assured the nomination of at least one woman. Clearly, these figures are still below the 30% mark that the international treaty, CEDAW, sets as its target for women's political representation.

The process of candidate recruitment and nomination is probably the most important for political parties to address if women's political participation is to be promoted. It remains unclear that all these political parties have an explicit policy of strengthening women's participation in politics other than referring to increase the numbers of women in national decision making in its Manifestos. The composition shown above seems to suggest that possible unequal gendered power relations within the political parties were not adequately addressed in most of the political parties' deliberations.

It has become largely an issue of implementation-through incorporating the commitment of political parties who play the role as gatekeepers to select women candidates for election and to empower women in positions of leadership and governance. One cannot fully understand the gender dimensions of access to political parties without an adequate understanding of the structures, policies, practices and values of political parties.

There can be little doubt, then, that these determine the ways in which political parties nominate their candidates; the number of women selected; where women rank on party lists, and the proportion of women who make it to elected office. Gender relations and realities faced by women often limit their opportunities to be placed in an electable/ and winnable positions on their party lists. What might explain this? There are many factors that affect a potential aspirant's evaluation of whether she will campaign for election. This include an assessment of the time involved, financial commitments, the likelihood of winning, personal ambition, family and community support and commitments, access to political and moneyed networks, remuneration, status and political power (Ballington and Martland (2004).

How did women candidates fare in the 13th General Election?

Women Candidates elected at parliamentary assembly levels

Parliamentary Level

Political Party	UMNO	MCA	MIC	Gerakan	Other ⁷ BN	DAP	PAS	PKR
Nominated	10	4	0	2	6	4	7	11
Elected	8	0	0	0	6	4	2	3

Source: Data extracted from the Election Commission released on May 6th, 2013

State Assembly Level

Political Party	UMNO	MCA	MIC	Gerakan	DAP	PAS	PKR
Nominated	32	13	1	3	18	19	18
Elected	26	0	0	0	18	8	5

Source: Data extracted from the Election Commission released on May 6th, 2013

The 13th General Election results indicate that, 23 women⁸ were elected at parliamentary level. At state assembly level, 57 out of 112 (50.8%) women⁹ contested, won in the election. When both parliamentary and state legislative seats are considered, there are now only 11 % women (80/727 seats). This is still lower than the 30% CEDAW target.

Reflecting on the results of the election, however, the success of women's candidates elected is mix between all the political parties. At parliamentary level, the biggest discrepancies between women who contested in the election and women who won have been observed in MCA, Gerakan, PKR and PAS. The percentage of elected women in MCA and Gerakan are the least stable. None of its candidates won. For PKR, only 27% of its women's candidates contested won in the election. Similarly, the percentage of women candidates who won in PAS is limited to 28.6%. In contrast, DAP performed remarkably well. All the DAP women's candidates contested at parliamentary and state assembly level won in the election.

This, in my view, is an acknowledgement that suggests the likelihood that DAP had strategically placed its women's candidates for winnable positions. Within the changing political landscape in Malaysia, another explanation for this might be that the discourse of women's political involvement is being reconfigured along partisan lines. Alignment defined by candidature is giving way to alignments defined by partisan-labelship. Political boundaries are increasingly redrawn to coincide with ethnicity and political ideologies. When major political ideology divide open up spaces among the different political parties, leading to sharp shift in voting patterns, democratic stability has come under intense pressure, which has in turn may have implications for gender equality (*sic*) (Leftwich, 2000). The question, "Do you think that a particular women

⁷ Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB)

⁸ Data extracted from The Election Commission issued on 6th May, 2013 (<http://resultpru13.spr.gov.my/>)

⁹ Ibid

candidate can perform” has been replaced by the much more fundamental question, “Which side are you on; the opposition or for the incumbent government”? Every electorate has to have an answer. That answer, its political ideology, defines a woman’s candidates who happen to be contesting in a constituency, the possibility to be elected. Given the prevailing perceptions of the changing voting patterns in Malaysia, it is not surprising to note that the popularity of political parties, instead of gender, had determine the success rate of woman candidate’s to be elected.

D. Conclusion

In the recent Malaysia 13th General Election, the substantive accomplishments of women’s participation in institutional politics are mixed. It is clear that issues and concerns about the under-representation of Malaysian women in politics have been around for considerably longer, despite of sustained and conscious efforts undertaken by civil societies and the UN agencies to promote a more equal representation of women in politics. It has become increasingly clear to me that every single number of women nominated and elected in the 13th General Election has been a response to the changing political circumstances. There is a main point to make here.

While continuous advocacies are needed to increase the number of women’s representatives in politics, the crux of the issue in the current context is not whether women politicians will use their leverage to advance women’s rights and development. With the increased ethnicity polarisation, one needs to ask critical questions as to how those women who have been elected could equally represent the concerns and rights of all women in Malaysia despite of their ethnicity differences. Who will these women politicians represent? How would these women’s politicians narrow the existing gap of inequalities in public policies when confronted with increased ethnicity divide? What types of capacity (and how much) are needed for these women politicians to influence at the parliamentary and state level? How possible is it for Malaysia to establish a bi-partisan parliament to ensure that women from the opposition party, who were elected, could equally represent the voice of its communities? Do political parties offer sufficient opportunities for women politicians to engage in national reconciliation efforts and dialogues?”

These are important questions to tackle head on, which have fallen to government, through international organisations and the national civil societies need to address. These questions have important implications to change and enforce laws and policies; and to gain resources for issues concerning development for all women in Malaysia. Assessing women’s politicians’ respective levels of engagement, their actual and potential impacts on policy making and implementation is a critical part of future democratic governance intervention. The appeal to women’s involvement in politics is an acknowledgement that women politicians play critical roles in facilitating policy gains for women’s, family and community development.

The question that is rarely been posed, let alone faced, is whether the glue itself would hold; that is , whether the effort to promote gender equality in women’s political representation can be viable in the conditions prevailing in much of an increased racial polarisation?

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