

Breaking the Glass Ceiling in Malaysian Political Parties

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It is no longer uncommon for “glass ceilings” to be acknowledged and addressed in the Malaysian workforce. In fact, Malaysians are realising the “dangers” of staying silent and have taken it in stride to talk about the “elephant in the room”. Inequality in the work place and the lack of women representation in senior management is prevalent, even today, across all industries. While there is genuine effort to question and change this unbalanced status quo in a number of fields of work, not much can be said about the adamant glass ceiling in Malaysian political parties. Equal and rightful representation of women in Malaysian politics has been an uphill battle. The fact that “the 30%” still remains a distant reality year after year proves that political parties are yet to understand that they are still actively and consciously disregarding the talent and perspectives of one prominent sect of their organization.

It would seem that for women politicians, even earning the respect and “legitimacy” of fellow *male* party members who of course, have more decision-making authority, is a long-shot. Civic society has questioned this “socially regressive” trend. The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) had criticised political parties in Malaysia for a lack of women political participation in the recently concluded Sabah state elections (Bunyan, 2020). Are political parties too entrenched within the ancient, perpetual fallacy that only men bring in votes? Or is this perhaps some form of power play or the need for a handful of people to stay in power? And what about the few women who do hold positions, how far is this based on merit and how much of this is tokenism?

Clipped wings: Women in Malaysian political parties

In 2016, Wanita UMNO released a statement “requesting” for 30% women candidates in Terengganu for the next general election. The following year, former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi urged that Wanita UMNO should be given 30% of the seats allocated to the party in the next election to “appreciate” their contributions. In 2019, yet again, Wanita UMNO released another similar statement expressing the need for 30% of women candidates in the upcoming elections (Bakar, 2016; Miwil, 2017; Husain, 2019). In 2018, just before GE14, Wanita MCA declared that while a list of 29 potential candidates was presented to party leadership, it was important to be “realistic” and “prioritise party interests” (The Star, 2018). Pakatan Harapan’s promise of at least 30% of women policy makers in government also remained unfulfilled up until the sudden change of government in March 2020 (Sukhani, 2020).

What is clear from these statements is that 1) we are (very) far from realising a **gender equal** political environment, because 30% is *not* 50% 2) legacy political parties are stuck in a moribund status quo and in the name of the “greater good” for the party, repeatedly shun qualified women party members 3) political positions are still seen as a “reward” for individuals (more so, if it is for a female candidate) rather than a catalyst for nation-building. In GE14, Barisan Nasional (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 (Sukhani, 2020; Mohamad, 2018). These numbers are dismal, to say the least; none of the coalitions/party have even reached 15% of female candidates of the total candidates fielded. It is then no surprise that the composition of the party’s central committee also reflects a similar trend. **Figure 1** indicates the percentage of women representatives in the central committee within major political

parties in Malaysia in 2020. Again, no party has achieved even 20% women representation in the central committee which is considered the highest governing body of a political party. Can it then be concluded that there is a grave lack of women in decision-making capacity within Malaysian political parties? The numbers certainly don't seem to lie.

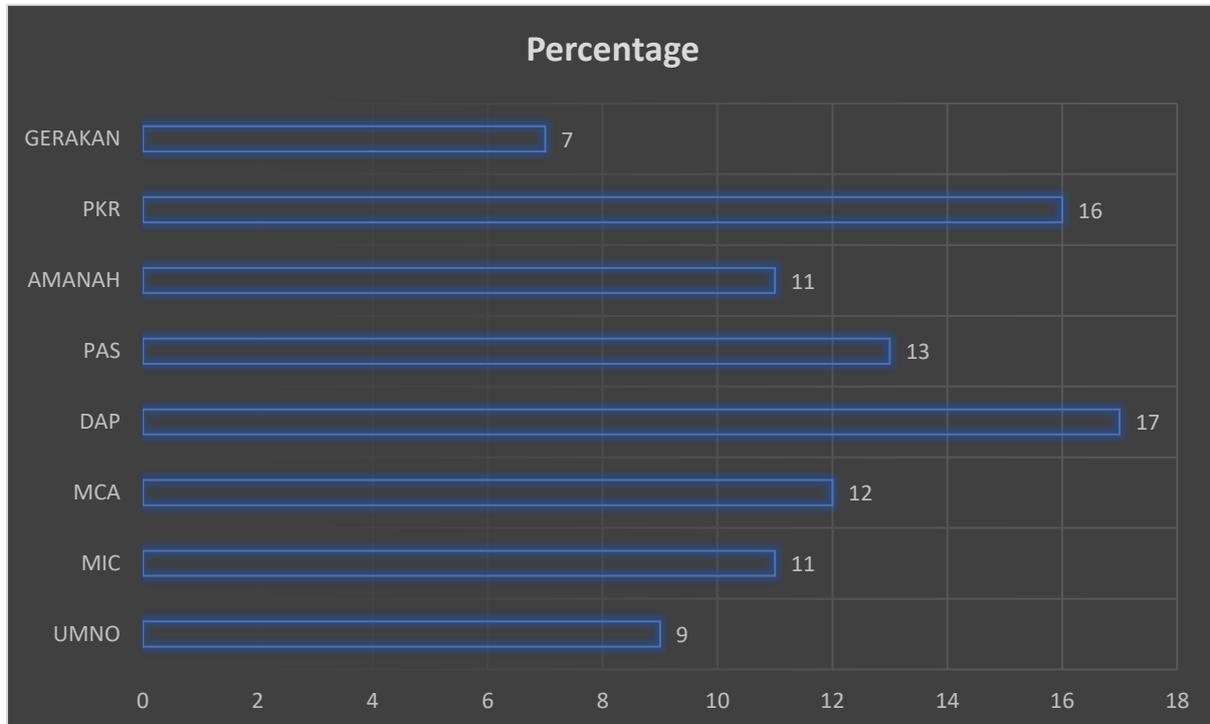


Figure 1. Percentage of women representatives in the central committee within major political parties in Malaysia, 2020 (Source: Data compiled from information found on the official website of each political party, figure style adapted from Mohamad, 2018)

Gender-skewed representation: Insidious power play or lackadaisical attitudes?

It is evident that gender-skewed representation in political parties has been the order of the day for Malaysia since it became possible for women to foray into politics. Today, despite achieving the milestone of having the first female deputy prime minister (in 2018) and several talented women parliamentarians and cabinet ministers over the years who have been considered trailblazers in their own right, Malaysia is still far off from achieving an “equal” political environment. In fact, it can be said that certain factions in Malaysia only continue to highlight these “achievements”, which in the grand scheme of things, are actually the “bare minimum”. What lauding the bare minimum actually does, is reinforce shortcomings in the system, particularly those that continue to restrict women participation and decision-making in politics.

Since top party leadership is male-dominated, it is then crystal clear that women parliamentarians have been filtered, vetted and assessed by male party members. In fact, what takes place in this process is a careful weighing of how “giving” this seat to a female party member would be helpful to the party in the long run. *Does this make the party progressive, women-friendly and “equal”? Will this show the citizens that the party has “feminist elements”? Is the party a “beacon for equality” through this act of allocating one seat for a female party member?* So, the focus here always seems to be on how female leadership

in the party is projected to the voters and women-interest groups who fiercely advocate for equal representation.

It is also said that Malaysia's first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system further exacerbates the problem of the severe lack of women leaders. In the FPTP system, constituencies are strategically divided among members of a coalition. These component parties are only able to contest a limited number of constituencies. Therefore, as only a limited number of candidates can be fielded, parties tend to favour experienced incumbents to win the seats, who are usually, of course, male (Sukhani, 2020). In fact, unless the female party member has a proven track record or the party decides to be "adventurous or unconventional", it is rare to see a party field a female candidate, when it has few seats to contest to begin with.

Gender-skewed representation doesn't stop at party level, in fact, it further aggregates when the party or coalition forms government. It is common knowledge that the government of the day has a hand in political appointments in the managing board of Government-Linked-Companies' (GLCs) (Gomez et al., 2018). Hence, it cannot be denied that the effects of party-level inequality are compounded significantly and "spill-over" even in the governance of major corporations that shape the trajectory of our economy and society. Women are then not given the space or opportunity to take on major decision-making roles. When they are, it's usually to ensure that the board *has* diversity and fulfils all the "accreditation fine print". This results in subtly distorted, male-centric policy-making which effectively dismisses or underplays the needs of one half of the Malaysian population. This is not to say that we've never had stellar women in prominent, game-changing roles. The argument here is for **more** equitable appointments where talented, qualified women are given the prerogative to drive the nation.

If political parties are the micro-systems in the political ecosystem, then government ministries loosely represent the macro-systems. The fact that the Ministry of Women, Family and Community (KPWKM) still plays an ancillary role in the government reflects the extent of the "aggregated inequality" that perpetuates from political parties. The few women who are allowed to contest in elections and win are more often than not, placed in auxiliary Ministries, such as the KPWKM. The role of the KPWKM has been for the most part, consistently constricted. Be it policies or causes that the KPWKM champions, there has never been a timely or permanent outcome that positively impacts the nation. A good example is the progress in adopting Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) which aims to allocate government resources in an equitable way (KPWKM, 2005). In 2020, interest groups and NGOs are still calling for greater GRB, which indicates that nothing substantial has been seen thus far. The Gender Equality Act, Sexual Harassment Act and Ban on Underage Marriage are also yet to see the light of day, evidencing that while the KPWKM can seek to tackle social issues, it is not wholly empowered to see them through.

Tokenism: How political parties get away with inequality

Tokenism is the unsaid evil of Malaysian politics and while Malaysia has seen its fair share of race and gender tokenism, little to no effort has been made to tackle this socially destructive phenomenon. Back in 2002, former Deputy Prime Minister, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail urged that it was necessary to "establish 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." She iterated that if women

are enabled to maximize their potential, they will be able to contribute to the empowerment of all citizens in society (Wan Ismail, 2002). Almost two decades later however, tokenism is still rampant, especially in politics. Fielding candidates just to “fill a quota”, political appointments in management for “diversity”, women ministers in “ancillary ministries” are some of the very real examples of tokenism in Malaysia.

Tokenism also rarely involves the careful assessment or evaluation of the calibre, skills and abilities of an individual. This results in a mismatch between the qualifications and expertise of the individual and the duties involved in political appointments. An example would be how a few “token” senators or GLC managers/directors put forth recommendations or arguments that are irrelevant and without basic knowledge of the subject matter. This becomes a major problem when questions are raised on why these women were appointed in the first place. It gives rise to baseless generalisations which further prevent other qualified women to get similar positions. Tokenism hence reinforces this toxic and vicious cycle which in the long run, defeats the purpose of equal representation. A number of female politicians have expressed their disapproval of the 30% quota, which in a way, also paves way for tokenism. Such quotas, in their opinion, are undemocratic. They believe that women who appeal to be fielded on the grounds of their gender are not motivated to legitimately compete on their merit (Sukhani, 2020).

It is interesting to note how prominent women leaders in the world don't really have to go through that first obstacle of “breaking through” from the women's wing. Jacinda Ardern's New Zealand Labour Party does not have a women's wing to begin with, but the party's constitution indicates that it is highly inclusive. The party's moderating committee which is established for the purpose of producing the final nationwide List of Party candidates in rank order must comprise of at least 50% women (New Zealand Labour Party Incorporated, 2019).

Closer to home, Taiwan has proven that quotas for female politicians may not be all bad. Women legislators in Taiwan take up 42% of seats in its legislative body, making it the most equitable in Asia. It would seem that Taiwan has arrived as a democracy where women have a fair shot at any political office. The island has now had a twice-elected female president, and a female vice president as early as in the year 2000. A long history of gender quotas for most political contests has been one of the main reasons for this gender-equal representation in Taiwan politics (Law, 2020). According to Law (2020), the quota system in Taiwan has not received much backlash as its intention has never been to replace a man who garnered more votes with a woman, in office. ***This is because the parties have the incentive to field strong, highly qualified, female candidates to pre-empt just that outcome*** (Law, 2020).

Other Asian countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have also had a number of eminent female politicians despite the overall under representation of women in their political systems. Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto and Sheikh Hasina, despite becoming political leaders due to their links to political dynasties, it is said that their symbolic status as powerful women, and thus as role models, provides scope for rebranding women as worthy political figures in the country's wider societal consciousness (Ara and Northcote, 2020). We have seen this phenomenon in Malaysia too in the likes of Wan Azizah, Nurul Izzah, Kasthurirani Pato who are all part of political dynasties. Hence, this sort of tokenism might not entirely be negative, but could lead to the complete side-lining of other female politicians who are not “hereditary politicians” (Zaman, 2012, as cited in Ara and Northcote, 2020). In

Malaysia, however, some notable women leaders like the late Rosemary Chow Poh Kheng, Rafidah Aziz and Ng Yen Yen who are not part of political dynasties, but still made their way up the ladder have become beacons to their political parties and have contributed to arguments that they have indeed been women representation “friendly”.

The Push for Meritocracy and Equity in Malaysian political parties

The call for equal gender representation in Malaysian politics is often confused as being a feminist struggle. Politicians must first understand that equality is just the right thing for society and that it is not a grand scheme to isolate one of the other genders, or worse, a plot to grab power. Political leaders must also learn how to move beyond individualistic political agendas and consider the “greater good” in the form of equitable policies, rich discussions and diverse perspectives – all of which can be expected of equal gender representation in politics. Tone-deaf statements that misunderstand and denigrate the push for equality must be condemned, indefinitely. In 2012, the then Prime Minister, Najib Razak questioned the need for a women’s movement in Malaysia as “equality has been given from the start” (Razak, 2012). While this may have been said for “dramatic effect”, the statement was at most, fictitious, as we have seen even in his own party, UMNO.

The quota system for women in Malaysian politics has been a double-edged sword. It is neither as visionary as the Taiwanese system or as equitable as the one seen in New Zealand’s Labour Party. What it has done, in the name of “fairness”, is isolate talent, encourage tokenism and reinforce a very unfavourable political environment for women. Hence, the call for meritocracy must be louder. Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz in a speech in 2013 spoke about meritocracy and how it would ensure inclusiveness regardless of gender. She urged that in this changing world, inclusiveness was no longer about being politically correct, having a quota, appeasement of women or about tokenism (Mok, 2013). It is in fact, about qualified individuals being given the space to thrive by their own merit. Political parties, which are mostly performance-driven will only benefit, through meritocracy. Meritocracy allows the party to consciously and consistently “extract” talent, thereby further legitimising its position in a changing world. Meritocracy also enables a fair system where just like Darwin’s theory of natural selection, would weed out liabilities (and snollygosters, as Shashi Tharoor puts it), purely based on an individual’s capabilities and resilience to withstand the pressures of the political system. Critics to meritocracy disregard the value it brings to the country, especially in terms of talent retention, as we have seen, is Malaysia’s Achilles’s heel.

One question however, is who decides what is “meritorious”? Will this decision again be made by a homogenous council? This possibility must be therefore countered by adopting the concept of equity in political party governance. What equity does is provide a level playing field which attempts to, in a small way, undo the inequalities that have happened thus far. Equitable governance in political parties is not unlike the system currently followed by the New Zealand Labour Party. Hence, striking a balance between merit and equity should be the new way forward for political parties that direly wish to remain relevant in the next decade or so.

Moving forward

Breaking the glass ceiling in Malaysian political parties has been futile to the point that inequality has been accepted as the permanent status quo. Could it be possible that a women’s wing within a political

party, in the name of equality and “championing women’s issues” may actually be hampering women empowerment? It is pivotal, now more than ever, that women’s voices are not ignored. Political parties that continue to undermine the importance of women representation are effectively also ignoring half of their electoral roll. Hence, parties that seek the mandate of the people should be ready to embrace the culture of equal opportunities for women.

It is also important that parties recognise that women voters come from all walks of life, just like men, and so instead of trying to appeal to women voters, through their one or two female candidates with superficial promises such as financial help or small business assistance, parties should have plans to build policies which call out to women of all ages, backgrounds and lifestyle choices.

Lastly, and the most important point is that political parties need to have the mature and pragmatic understanding of not letting internal “party politics” dominate the women agenda. If the aim is to empower women, do it right. Ensure that candidates, whether male or female are committed to driving gender responsive and gender sensitive policies. If the party wants to champion greater women representation, field the right people, with the right vision, anything less is just, again, regressive tokenism, and that, is not progress.

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