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Long climb to Cabinet

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WHEN the Women's Agenda for Change was proposed in January, a prominent woman politician, anxious to make a Press statement, approached the media.

She was all for pushing for the action plans in the memorandum, she said. But when asked which critical issues she would give priority to, the outspoken public figure was dumbfounded. For a good many minutes, she could not name a single area of concern, and then began to pore over the contents of the 11-point agenda, groping for an answer.

Is this typical of many women politicians, whom observers say are not issue-oriented? Are they not as competent as men at their jobs? Are they not assertive enough? Could they be lacking in political savvy thus not having the skills to market themselves prominently?

If all or a combination of these factors are true, then Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad may just have a point when, in a reply to a question why there were not many women in the new Cabinet, he said he could not find enough suitable ones.

Hence, although for the first time in Malaysian electoral history the percentage of women Members of Parliament has doubled to 10 per cent - which means there now are 20 women in all - only two have been given ministerial posts and two made deputy ministers.

This is not significant considering that Malaysian women's involvement in politics has spanned five decades, says Professor Wazir Jahan Karim of Universiti Sains Malaysia, in her review of the 10th general election with emphasis on Islam and women.

Their struggle for political representation since the days of AWAS (Angkatan Wanita Se Malaysia), Kaum Ibu and Wanita Umno seems not to have attained much. In recent years, the number of parliamentary and State seats has risen from 4.9 per cent in 1991 to 7.8 per cent in 1995. But the dip to 7.3 per cent in 1999 is cause for discomfort and contradictory to women's phenomenal success in higher education, she says.

The Prime Minister's remark is thus cause for concern. It prompted Datuk Dr Nellie Tan-Wong, the co-founder of the Women's Institute of Management, to urge the Prime Minister to reconsider his decision.

In an open letter dated Dec 15, Tan-Wong wrote to the Prime Minister: "We are stunned until today, that never mind about the increase, the number of women Cabinet ministers was in fact reduced and even the status quo not retained.

"We cannot forget the utterances and statements made by government leaders on the confidence they have in women. Women also came out in large numbers and worked hard as party workers during the election.

"The statement you made, Sir, at your announcement of the Cabinet, that you would have liked to appoint more women ministers but could not find suitable candidates, is a serious judgement on the capabilities and leadership level of Malaysian women."

Other women share this feeling, but instead of lamenting, women leaders say, female politicians must do some soul searching, work on their weaknesses and build on strengths.

Datuk Professor Nik Safiah Karim, chairman of the National Advisory Council of the Integration of Women in Development (NACIWID) says, "I believe we have enough women politicians for consideration, although they are untried.

"The problem lies in the fact that they are not sufficiently pushed to the front. I see two reasons for this. Firstly, political parties, with the exception of men who lately have been vigorous in their efforts, have not shown enough planning and strategy to provide better images for their women (members). As such very few have come into public (and top leaders') attention.

"Secondly, women politicians, especially those aspiring for positions, are not issue-oriented. Many drift along and have not singled out any specific area of concern in a serious manner, not even issues relating to women, be they local or global. And this, in spite of the four world conferences on women!"

Puan Sri Professor Fatimah Hamid Don, the deputy chairman of NACIWID, agrees. "It is true," she said, "women leaders have to be better and more hardworking, than men to be noticed. So, they should cultivate their respective platforms, campaign for specific targets (within the party manifesto), rally for support and present workable programmes. As long as they remain supporting entities, they become dispensable when victory is secured after the elections.

"Perhaps it's time to stop being just the tea-makers and perayu undi for the club. We must really make a stand against being treated as second class and demand the apologies and redress for not having our leadership acknowledged," says Zaitun Kassim, vice-president of the All Women's Action Movement (AWAM) and the DAP candidate for Selayang at the recent election.

"If we are lamenting, it is with good reason. It is purely male bias we are up against," she says.

Zaitun alleges that women in Wanita Umno have to wait in the wings as space in the "main body" appears to be limited.

"But the wings are not playing the empowerment role they used to, relegating women to the 'second pick' box. The real training ground for budding leaders, the Pemuda wings, is largely male-dominated.

"It is interesting to note that at least two men (one of whom the public has little knowledge of) were appointed as Senators prior to being given ministerial posts.

"So what more do women need to do to prove their competence? That they are competent is clear enough and they shouldn't require inordinate 'proving'. We do not require this of men."

Of course there's no question of the ability of Malaysian women, but a glass ceiling exists.

Shahreen Kamaluddin, president of Women for Women Association Malaysia, says given the current reality, it is a little out of date to say that there are not enough suitable women for top positions in the Cabinet or in public or private corporations.

"Women have made in-roads but in all sectors, the numbers holding positions as chief executive officers, directors and Cabinet ministers are still dismal.

"We need to recognise that they have to be selected first and given the opportunity to make their presence felt at middle levels before they can be considered for positions at the highest levels.

"For example, in politics, too few women are selected for positions at all levels of the political hierarchy - branch, division, State and parliamentary level. This eventually limits the choice of women for Cabinet positions.

"Leaders of all political parties should ensure more women are 'groomed' for top Cabinet positions," says Shahreen who is also executive chairman of Personal Empowerment Training and Consulting Sdn Bhd.

For this to happen, men must be more willing to open their ranks to more

women and see value in their contributions.

"It will not see women running the country overnight or burn their bras, but this will give them a chance to be at decision-making levels in all aspects of the economic, social and political spheres," stresses lawyer Azalina Othman Said.

"What I would really like to see in the 21st century is more of our political leaders, especially men, becoming gender-sensitive," she adds.

This is inevitable. As gender becomes an important agenda in popular politics, the next millennium will see many more women assuming leadership positions and they will become powerful instruments of change, says Wazir.

Where do we go from here?

"Back to the drawing board, that is, if we have one," Fatimah says.

"Review our strategies if we have any and identify potential leaders for grooming and training.

"It's time for them to go into groups and team up with other interest groups like non-governmental organisations and professionals," says Nik Safiah.

"Members of Wanita Umno need to assess their credibility as leaders first and learn to work as a team," said Fatimah Yeop Sendiri, a public relations practitioner. "Right now, it lacks direction; that is why it fails to focus on any issue."

Fatimah (Hamid Don) continues, "The older and younger generation must work together and in consultation with the senior leaders. They must not dismiss or ignore the experience that earlier women leaders have gained."

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