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Women taking their rightful place

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WOMEN, keep your fingers crossed.

All political parties with the exception of Pas are talking about increasing the number of women candidates to be fielded in this general election.

And rightly so.

For political parties to remain relevant in the coming decades, new faces and ideas would be needed.

One obvious way to achieve this would be to look at the growing number of qualified women who have worked alongside their male counterparts and have acquired considerable managerial experience in the course of their political work.

Many are pragmatic, hard-working and smart. They have helped to deliver the votes, they have worked tirelessly as foot soldiers and, despite the "ceilings" they come up against, they have remained, by and large, loyal to their respective parties.

Yet, most of them are bypassed again and again because, as astute as they may be, the political game is dominated by men. Another reason may be that they are comfortable as "backroom boys" in their parties.

That their efforts are not openly acknowledged is reflected in the number of women who are made ministers and deputy ministers.

In 1990 there were only two full women ministers and three deputy ministers. Altogether there were 10 women MPs and in the case of Umno, only three of them made it to the supreme council.

In 1995, there were two full women ministers, three deputy ministers and one parliamentary secretary. Thirteen were made MPs and, again, in the case of Umno, only four made it to the supreme council.

But this time, many women politicians are hoping that the numbers will increase in their favour.

It is believed that Wanita Umno is trying to get an extra two seats in each state.

As for Wanita MCA, they will be fielding six women candidates - four for parliamentary and two at state level, says it's deputy secretary-general, Rita Sim.

Wanita MIC is hoping for two women to be fielded this time. Before 1990, there were no women candidates.

Outside of the BN it is unclear how many women are being nominated. Thus far, newspaper reports indicate at least four candidates are women from the various parties.

All these are indications that things are changing. As the voters become more mature, more exacting, and demanding, the candidates have to respond likewise.

And because of their mental make-up and cultural conditioning, women politicians tend to be more receptive to these changing demands.

Women today represent 54 per cent of all registered voters.

And, as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir himself pointed out two days ago, 59 per cent of the 9.7 million Malaysians eligible to vote are women.

He, for one, recognises the power of women, calling them great assets to the nation.

It can be assumed, that the women who can vote have had some education and would know what they want for themselves, their families and

communities.

Political parties must recognise this. One way to do this would be to increase the number of women at decision-making levels in their organisations.

More so than men, women politicians would also be able to address or resolve issues affecting women more satisfactorily.

They would at least be more supportive of the Women's Agenda For Change which received tepid response from many parties.

Yet another reason why women should become more visible in politics is because Pas is trying to silence the woman's voice in this crucial arena.

Although the Kelantan State Government claims that it is protecting women and putting them on a pedestal, the decisions to prevent women from running in the general election smacks of patronising misogyny.

"We don't allow them to be exploited. The contest is very rough. It's dangerous to women," said Kelantan's Mentri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat.

His policy not to hire attractive women for government jobs, saying they are more likely to land rich husbands, is also another insidious attempt to put women down.

Women should fight against this. Malaysia is, after all, a moderate and progressive country. If we allow the curbing of women's space and rights, we may regress and become like many Middle-Eastern countries where women cannot drive, go out to work, and travel on their own, let alone vote.

Here in Malaysia, it is not that women have not been recognised for their contributions to nation-building. But specific acknowledgements should be more visible.

With this general election, women may finally be able to claim their rightful place in Malaysian politics.

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