

All things being unequal - Wan Azizah as MB
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COMMENT Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (Empower) is gravely concerned with the quality of the debate that has been going on regarding a woman candidate for the Selangor menteri besar (MB) post.

Impossibly high moral standards are placed on Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. We have heard from many quarters criticisms such as: she is Anwar Ibrahim's wife and thus his puppet, that she purportedly has no clout, she is not competent enough, and that she does not have the 'wow' factor. On these bases, critics have shunned her as a potential candidate as MB.

Competency has been the least of consideration in so many other cases that involve male MBs. Why was such a standard not used on Dr Zambray Abdul Kadir (right) when he took over as the Perak MB with the blessing of three assemblypersons who jumped over to BN?

There are men whose rise up the ranks of party hierarchy was smoothed purely on the basis of patronage and nepotism. Are the standards now being applied to Dr Wan Azizah also applied to Mukhriz Mahathir, who rose to power with his father's support?

Was the question asked so ferociously of these men about 'the shadowy hand' that helped them into positions of power? We recall that despite accusations of impropriety and nepotism from a few principled voices, in the end these incidents were generally shrugged off as Malaysian politics as usual.

Internalised misogyny and sexism affect gender politics when it comes to women's political participation and representation. In Dr Wan Azizah's case, her independence, her intelligence, her connections, her qualifications are all scrutinised to the hilt. All these become do or die questions that must be answered.

Sadly such standards are allowed to fall short for men in power. After all, men are men. Politics is for the boys' club and women who play by their rules.

We have seen how gendered dimensions of power and politics play out. These very men who made it to the top raise their shields to exclude others and cling on to what they think is rightfully theirs. And, with the collusion of those fighting for crumbs from men in power, how structural inequalities and sexist politics supported and maintained status quo. Why were these not questioned?

As well, let us not overlook the fact that democratic processes have been violated. There has much confusion about the process of appointing a menteri besar from all players, including Pakatan Rakyat.

Malaysia does not practice a system of directly electing a state or federal leader. In Malaysia's parliamentary system, the decision to appoint an MB lies with the representatives of political parties elected by voters into state assemblies.

A majority of 30 out of 56 elected assemblypersons have thrown their support behind Dr Wan Azizah as the candidate for the MB post. By the parliamentary system practiced in Malaysia, this should suffice. Unfortunately, in practice it seems that this process can be thrown out at will.

However, Empower finds some encouragement in the support given by the assemblypersons to Dr Wan Azizah and what it tells us about the changing gender politics in Malaysia. We must not ignore the fact that political parties are taking more steps to put women as candidates. This is the change we need to support if we are committed to democracy and gender equality.

Deconstructing the 'wow factor'

The struggle for women's political participation is indeed an uphill one and doubly so when women are judged according to patriarchal standards. We need to deconstruct the 'wow factor' Dr Wan Azizah is accused of lacking: what qualities does it promote, and what does it ignore? Right now, do we need a leader who makes fiery speeches or one who can build bridges across distrust?

The demands placed on Dr Wan Azizah ignore her standing experience as the leader of a political party, elected assemblyperson and her potential to change the gender dynamics of politics in Malaysia.

Should she become MB, it will mean that political and bureaucratic systems have to deal with a woman in all ceremonies, in all meetings, decision-making processes, and work under her command.

This is the first test case to see if the system, with all its prejudices and socialised patriarchal values, can deal with her leading a state.

What Empower is saying is that having a woman MB will raise the bar and demand that decision-makers do better than politics as usual. If Dr Wan Azizah does not perform and do us proud, then she deserves to be voted out as a representative.