

## **Sexism underpins attacks on Wan Azizah**

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COMMENT Parties on both sides of the Malaysian political divide are drenched in nepotism. So, why are the on-going attacks on PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail still continuing?

In the crisis that has been unfolding in Selangor more than two months now, many have been quick to line up reasons why Wan Azizah is not fit to be the menteri besar of Selangor.

From the fact that she is Anwar Ibrahim's wife, to competency, charisma, not being forward enough, abilities under-pressure, even down to the simple fact she is a woman, many have not held back the punches in their personal character attacks on Wan Azizah.

Everybody was quick to condemn the outrageous and overtly sexist comments by Umno lawyer Mohd Hafarizam Harun (right) about Wan Azizah not being fit for office because of her menstrual cycle.

While those comments are easy to condemn, and should be, the more subtle and internalised sexism that takes its form in other criticisms against Wan Azizah ought to be examined as well.

Underpinning many of these attacks is the reality that people are more critical of women in powerful positions than they are of men. Wan Azizah is being held against a moral and skill standard that is far beyond what most politicians can withstand.

One doesn't have to look far to find a Malaysian politician whose career has benefitted from nepotism. However, for Lim Guang Eng, nepotism is over-looked. An economist by training and his qualities as a leader are all that are judged.

And, as for Wan Azizah, is it just that being Anwar's wife that makes her suitable?

Behind the assumption that Wan Azizah will be a puppet is the idea that women cannot lead without the help of men.

Women politicians face many obstacles

Across Asia, from Sonia Gandhi to Aung San Su Kyi and Megawati Sukarnoputri, many women leaders have risen to power with famous fathers. A need for lineage to succeed is a reflection of societies where women have traditionally been excluded from the political arena.

Instead of evidence of inadequacies or an under-serving nature, the rise of these women to

positions of power is all the more incredible in that they faced many obstacles they had to overcome.

I live in Australia and it is much the same here, in that the halls of power have traditionally been closed to women. Many celebrated the rise of Julia Gillard (on the left) to the role of Australia's prime minister as an important milestone for equality.

However throughout her three years in office, Gillard was endlessly hounded and harassed by opposition politicians and the media for things male leaders were never questioned on. She was attacked for her choice of clothes, hair-cut, her accent and her voice, and for the fact that she hadn't had children.

The increased scrutiny and criticism of her appearance beyond what any male prime minister in Australia had ever experienced only sought to continuously draw attention away from her politics.

In moving the public discourse to her characteristics, little space was given to her policies and the legislation she passed during her time in office.

Much of the response to the Gillard government showed that while Australians elected a female leader, many in society had on-going uneasiness about having a woman in charge.

While not saying that criticism can't be made of a politician because of his or her gender, it is important to think about what is fair criticism and what is based on sexist assumptions, while also keeping in mind all the men in politics who never faced this much scrutiny.

Criticising Wan Azizah's demeanour for not being loud or forceful enough is, in many ways, criticising her for not behaving in the way men are socialised to.

It's important that we see more discussions about Wan Azizah's policies, her direction for the state of Selangor and what she says, not how it is said. She should be judged on her ability to govern, lead a coalition and solve some of the pressing issues in the state, such as the Selangor water crisis.

However, for some, it appears that her gender is the hurdle that can't be got over.

Commentary that only gets as far as her being a woman, or who her husband is, is not political commentary at all. It's just plain sexism!