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Women in early politics

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MALAYSIAN women of all ethnicities were first politicised in the turbulent years of World War II. The change of rulers, from British to Japanese, awakened the local population to the possibility of their own liberation.

Nevertheless, women from different ethnic communities could only express the meaning of nationalism within their segregated cultural and historical contexts.

Although Malay, Chinese and Indian women were all able to actively participate in nationalist movements, they did not have the ideal of a shared nation-state and neither were they united in strategy.

The "nation" at that time was not necessarily the physical ground upon which one stood. The concept of nationalism was really about the liberation of each other's notion of a "homeland". It was less to do with building a new and united territory of belonging.

For Malay women nationalists, the concept of the Malaya-Raya or a greater Malaysia-Indonesia entity was considered the more natural option.

For Chinese and Indian women, loyalty was still largely attached to an original homeland. The concept of a national citizenship was a new notion and for them, British Malaya was merely an administrative unit, if not an ambiguous idea of territory.

For Malay women the rise of left-leaning Malay political movements soon after the end of World War II was one of the avenues which afforded them non-traditional roles.

The Malay Nationalist Party (MNP) was one of the first political parties to establish a women's wing, known as the Angkatan Wanita Sedar (Awat - Force of Awakened Women), in 1946.

Although women were largely recruited for populist mobilisation, strong and outstanding women emerged from this political organi-



Tunku Abdul Rahman addresses a gathering of Kaum-kaum Ibu (Umno women's wing) in Sungai Petani, Kedah.

sation. Aishah Ghani, who became one of the leaders of Wanita Umno, Sakinah Junid who led PAS, and Shamsiah Fakih who became a prominent Malay member of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) all started off with Awat as their training ground.

In 1948, the MNP and its women's and youth wings were banned. The British Military Administration, which resumed control of Malaya following Japan's defeat, considered it to be pro-Japanese, leftist and militant.

In 1947, the Persatuan Kaum Ibu (PKI) also came into being. Its main role was to complement and support the newly established Umno. The PKI later evolved as Wanita Umno.

The early phase of women's involvement in Umno was not simply one of compliance to male dominance. Khatijah Sidek, who was elected head of the women's wing in 1954, was one of the first leaders to question gender disparity within the party.

She demanded that more women be represented in party decision-making bodies and that more women be nominated to contest for seats. She did pay a price for this and was ultimately expelled from the party.

Among Chinese women, it was their schooling experience which influenced their political involvement. Chinese schools were then direct off-

shoots of the system in China. Some Chinese women joined the anarchist movement, after the one in China and many more became members of the CPM.

Likewise, Indian women in the country joined political movements that emanated from India. In 1941, when Subash Chandra Bose formed the Indian National Army (INA), Indian women in Malaya were recruited to be part of the army's Rhani of Jansi Regiment. They trav-



TUN V.T. SAMBANTHAN'S FAMILY

Malaysia's second cabinet which included the first woman minister, Tun Fatimah Hashim who was the Minister of General Welfare in 1969.

elled to Burma to make their way into India.

The first training camp for women was set up in Singapore where Dr Lakshmi Swaminathan, an Indian doctor was practising. She was put in charge of the fighting and nursing units.

In fact, so strong was the fervour against colonialism (in India rather than Malaya) that Janaki Davar from Kuala Lumpur, a mere 17-year-old, was inspired to sign up as a soldier with the INA despite initial resistance from her parents.

Although the above involvements were inspired by a common anti-colonial sentiment, the mobilisation was still forged along an ethnic-distinct platform and did not provide enough opportunity for all women to build a universal bond.

It was only after the end of World War II that the political struggles for unity and the building of a common Malayan nation took off in a concerted way. However, a multi-racial political strategy was still not an accepted norm.

Multi-racial political parties which took account of women's rights were not popular. For example, the



Tan Sri Aishah Ghani

Independence of Malaya Party, set up in 1951 by Datuk Onn Jaafar, promised equal opportunities for all regardless of sex. It did not survive beyond one year of existence.

Another failed attempt at building a multiracial party was in 1954 when the Parti Negara (National Party) was launched. It, too, promised equal pay for equal work and equal opportunities for women but with no electoral success.

The non-communal Pan-Malayan Labour Party included a "Women's Charter" initiated by Mrs B. H. Oon, Malaya's first woman lawyer. This party was also shortlived.

Campaigns around women's rights did not necessarily lead to women's unity across creed and belonging. Political mobilisation was based upon ethnic identity, a reality that has endured till today.

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