

DATE: 27/08/2007

ARKIB NEGARA - MPS



A large crowd of women elbowing their way to vote at a polling station in Mersing, Johor, during the first general elections in Malaya in 1955. The Alliance won 51 parliamentary seats out of 52.

Women's participation in politics: Is a quota needed?

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IS THE participation of women in politics and political life an accurate and adequate indicator of gender equality and empowerment in a country? Apparently so.

The participation of women in parliament is one of the three indicators of the Gender Empowerment Measure according to the United Nations Development Report.

Not only that, it is also assumed that there should be at least a critical mass of 30% of women in high places so that, as decision makers, they can make changes towards gender equality.

According to this quantitative index then, are women politically empowered in Malaysia? Not really as after 50 years of independence, women make up only 9.6% of the House of Representatives, 6% in state assemblies, 9% of cabinet ministers and comprise 10% of total members in local authority councils. Nonetheless, they do make up 30% of the total senators in the country.

It has indeed been a slow and arduous climb for Malaysian women to gain political representation.

The perennial question is: why are there so few women in political office? Are women not interested in politics? If they are interested, what are the barriers to their participation?

Actually, it is a myth that women do not participate in politics. Women comprise around 50% of the membership in both the ruling and opposition political parties. The women's and Puteri wings of Umno, MCA and MIC have been active, untiring and loyal supporters of their respective parties and are often seen campaigning house-to-house during election time, come rain or shine.

The three women Members of Parliament of DAP have been quite vocal in championing women's issues in the Dewan Rakyat. Apparently, DAP and Parti Keadilan Rakyat have passed a resolution towards achieving 30% women's participation in leadership positions in their respective parties.

Yet many barriers hamper women's journey towards political leadership positions. Much of these are in the nature of how politics is experienced and practised in Malaysia, if not at the global level. Politics is still a male-dominated macho world where those who have financial resources and political backing have a head start in the "race". Not having much economic resources to start with, women are caught in a quandary.

Further, their physical and moral space to seek political endorsement are severely constrained by tradition and culture. Their roles as good mothers and good women are questioned

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in public if they openly aspire to political power.

Nonetheless, does increased women's representation automatically translate into increased women's rights?

Women's groups in Malaysia have been asking for at least a 30% representation of women in decision making positions and in political leadership. But we all know that increasing women's participation in elected office does not guarantee their automatic transformation into advocates for women's rights and empowerment.

The debate over the quota system within the women's movement has been intense as some of the women who have been elected, for example, in India or Pakistan, have been little more than representatives of their men folk who are the wealthy or politically corrupt in the area under contestation.

However, over time, some of these women have become politically savvy and have started asserting their own agenda, which is usually that of rural development. Alarmed by this, some male politicians are demanding that the quota system be abolished as it is detrimental to their culture!

To be sure, the quota system should be viewed as a temporary measure and should not be a ploy to garner votes from women. It is but a route towards the structural transformation of society to abolish gender inequality.

The recently unfurled 9th Malaysia Plan has finally endorsed a 30% policy for women's participation in decision making in all sectors of society. It remains to be seen how legislative and policy instruments will be utilised to ensure that this percentage is achieved.

At the end of the day, the most important aspect is to have political representatives, whether men or women, who have their constituency and Malaysian society at heart.

But to start with, political parties have to assure their supporters that they are pro-active regarding women's interests. They can do this by adopting a Gender Equality and Women's Rights Platform that will address gender and other forms of social inequality in the country and by ensuring that there are sufficient quality women representatives at the highest levels of governance.

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