

Women winners
New Straits Times
October 09, 2011

BEFORE the award of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize to Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberian activist Leymah Gbowee and Yemeni dissident Tawakkul Karman, only a dozen peace laureates have been women. But in increasing the number by 25 per cent by giving it to three women, Norwegian Nobel Institute director Geir Lundestad insisted that the committee did not feel pressured to close the gender gap. Of course, no one is suggesting that they give it to women simply to make up the numbers. But as previous winners like Betty Williams, Mairead Corrigan and Rigoberta Menchu Tum have shown, women have long been at the front lines of peace campaigns in trouble spots from Northern Ireland to Guatemala. In fact, there has never been a lack of candidates with character and courage, but a lack of recognition of the role of women in peace movements. In any case, one does not have to be a feminist to recognise the contributions and achievements of women. As such, just as the empowerment of women is an important issue in the Middle East and Africa, it is not possible for the Nobel panel to support women's rights without making up for the lamentable deficit of women laureates.

Clearly, as its chairman Thorbjorn Jagland acknowledged, it was not possible for the Norwegian committee to ignore the Arab Spring. Indeed, the Yemeni winner of the peace award has dedicated her prize to all the protesters in North Africa and the Middle East. Clearly, too, just as it did in awarding the prize to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, Shirin Ebadi and Liu Xiabo, in selecting an outspoken critic of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Nobel committee has thrown its weight behind the dissidents. Of course, as the cases of Suu Kyi and Ebadi suggest, its support may not have tangible effects. In fact, the peace prize carries with it considerable personal risks and political backlashes.

In this sense, the adverse reaction to Sirleaf's Nobel award from her political opponents is not surprising. When the bigger prize is the country's presidency, and the international award has been given days before the presidential election in Liberia, few of the candidates would be disposed to believe that the committee does not "look at domestic politics" when it comes to dishing out the peace prize. In the end, the international recognition may not make a difference to the election. But whatever happens tomorrow, it is comforting that women like Gbowee will be around to make sure that peace will not be broken in Liberia.

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