

**As polls loom, BN's women appear invisible**  
**The Malaysian Insider**  
**April 13, 2012**  
**By Dina Zaman**

ANALYSIS, April 13 — Off the top of your head and in 10 seconds, can you name five Barisan Nasional (BN) women politicians and another five from Pakatan Rakyat (PR)?

When this question was posed to people, only stalwarts like Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz, Datuk Seri Sharizat Jalil, Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen came to mind.

At the same time, the names of PR's women leaders such as Nurul Izzah Anwar, Hannah Yeoh, Elizabeth Wong, Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail and Teresa Kok came more readily to respondents.

The invisibility of the women in BN does not bode well for the coalition, especially when the youth and women's votes will be crucial in the coming general election.

Women in BN often see themselves as background elements, said one public relations executive.

Who is to blame for this? It could be the public relations agency they hired or, more precisely, had not hired. Whatever the reason, a politician — just like the dime-a-dozen celebrities of today — must be visible. And in a country where women's participation in politics is still low, this is worrying.

Could it be that the media and other publicity machines do not deem women as important and newsworthy? Or could it be that these politicians are not media savvy?

A senior public relations practitioner, who asked not to be named, made the following observations.

"The BN female politician appears not to have any particular opinion or position on any substantive issues, that is, a voice or opinion on matters related to the governing of Malaysia.

"They appear to lack substance. From a communications perspective, they lack the ability to produce credible 'sound bites' that resonate with the rakyat. How can they be relevant if they are not credible in the first place?" he said.

On why he thought PR women politicians are more media savvy, he said: "I believe that since PR is trying to build [the concept of a 'shared voice and mind'] in the eyes of voters, its women leaders have no choice but to take the more assertive stand.

"Savvy? Perhaps, as they appear to be able to articulate their views a little more clearly. (I'm) not sure about (them being) photogenic but, certainly from an image perspective, the PR women appear to be more 'humble'. Smarter, again, it may be that there is a vacuum for credible female leaders that the PR women just fill the void by that virtue."

Some tips he had for women politicians include trying to understand policy issues and begin explaining these to the rakyat clearly and simply.

“Avoid being perceived as ‘nagging’ but encouraging discourse. Perhaps, have a clear orientation and immersion programme for the young female candidates on the history, national issues and government functions of the country. I would also recommend this to their male counterparts,” he adds.

PR’s women politicians such as Nurul Izzah have leveraged social media to promote themselves.

Juana Jaafar, an activist and social commentator, can rattle off politicians’ names in an instant. She is, however, not blind to the challenges women politicians face, whichever side of the political aisle they are from.

When it comes to the dearth of women politicians in BN, she thinks it is because they —whether consciously or subconsciously — see themselves as subordinate to the existing frontline that is predominantly male.

“They are most relevant in their role in the election machinery. But on policies and current issues, they rarely make original statements or statements stronger than the frontline men. They are ‘Yes’ (wo)men.

“Sometimes they do try to say something besides that which has already (been) said by the frontliners; however, these statements end up being remarks on sanitary pads, and (other trivialities). How la?” she asks.

According to Juana, the women politicians in PR are more independent and media savvy, and with the help of social media, they have managed to distinguish themselves from the pack.

“They are their own individuals first. They also seem to respond to current affairs promptly without waiting for lyrics from the central committee. Most importantly, I think their parties also encourage them to put themselves out there to be heard and known, as individuals,” she says.

Juana also said the media should be more proactive in seeking the views of women politicians, especially if they are unwilling to rise to the occasion.

The media should not limit them to just women’s issues, she said, adding that forum organisers should also make room for them.

“This is a great way to give them platform. But more importantly, if their own parties are not willing to make room for them (in power, representation) then that is their worth to the public,” she adds.

How do communications executives from political parties feel about the invisibility of women leaders?

Praba Ganesan, social media strategist for Parti Keadilan Rakyat, said both BN and PR need more progress in this area.

“Both suffer from having women’s wings rather than just caucuses. Because wings separate women from the main body, except when it comes to general assemblies and divisional

politics. But it is a throwback to the old days of Ibu in Umno," he said.

"There are not enough women on both sides of the divide getting media access. (It is) not media's fault; women don't assume enough senior positions to merit media attention.

Dr Wan Azizah's (left) presidency in PKR may break gender barriers, said Praba.

"Dr Wan Azizah being the president of PKR does break stereotypes. There has never been a woman leading a major political party. So a generation of girls might start to see politics as a place where they can lead... Just like how Margaret Thatcher became the role model for both Conservative and Labour girls a generation later," he added.

It is also a matter of time before gender-based wings must go, he said, and be replaced by issue-based caucuses.

"The US Democratic party has the black caucus, so that its black leaders can come together to talk about black issues. Same way some of the blacks being women can come together for their caucus meeting. They all largely operate in an undivided Democratic party, and only break into small sessions to discuss specific minority issues," he said.

"Girl politics is not different from boy politics. Education, healthcare, public transportation are all our issues," said Praba.

The younger generation has a cadre of new women politicians now. They are media-savvy, photogenic and grassroots oriented. And they happen to be PR politicians.

For now, there is nothing wrong with this disparity. If anything, it can be a source of inspiration for some.

Yet it also does not augur well for BN and its women leaders, young and old. The current perception is that they are behind the curve and struggling to find relevance. And this would be a shame, as there could be stellar leaders among themselves.

But unless their environment begins to offer more support for them and their policies, they will likely remain BN's invisible women.

The Malaysian Insider

Copyright © 2012 The Malaysian Insider

Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/as-polls-loom-bns-women-appear-invisible/>