

Ambiga and the fate of women leaders in Malaysia
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Gender equality is not a reality in Malaysia, despite recent government assurances. The treatment of Bersih organising committee co-chairperson Ambiga Sreenevasan confirms this.

April was a terrible month for women in the country.

It saw Prime Minister Najib Razak announce that he would be taking over the portfolio of the Minister for Women, Family and Community Development, following the resignation of its Minister, under pressure for [corruption](#).

Local women's groups were aghast at the move, noting, in a joint statement, that women's affairs had "languished at the bottom of the pile" when it had previously been located in the Prime Minister's Office.

Later that month, Bersih organised a series of rallies, collectively known as Bersih 3.0, calling for clean and fair elections, and the government has used the violent turn of events that day as a platform from which to increase its attacks on Ambiga.

Already, Ambiga's name could scarcely be mentioned amongst government insiders without some measure of vitriol attached to it.

"Who doesn't know Ambiga. She's the one who threatened Islam," Najib reportedly told a crowd in the run-up to the Bersih 2.0 rally last year.

"*Awas! Ambiga wanita Hindu yang berbahaya*" ("Warning! Ambiga is a dangerous Hindu woman") read leaflets distributed by Malay rights group Perkasa.

Less than a fortnight after the Bersih 3.0 rally, Ambiga's critics began to drive home their points – quite literally. Traders apparently upset about alleged loss of income from Bersih 3.0 held a protest outside Ambiga's house, by setting up a burger stall and giving away free burgers.

A few days later, a group of army veterans turned up on Ambiga's doorstep to stage their own protest. The protest included having the ex-servicemen turn their backs on her home, and stretch and shake their buttocks as part of an "exercise". The group warned they would take further action if Ambiga continued to bring more trouble to Malaysia.

Since then, two more groups have attempted to hold protests outside or near her house, with one even handing over a memorandum detailing why Ambiga should leave the country if she did not apologise to all Malaysians.

Ambiga called the veterans' protest "crude", and has referred to the protests on her doorstep as an "invasion of privacy." Her fellow co-chairperson, former national laureate A Samad Said, meanwhile, has raised the question of why he and none of the other members of the organising committee have been targeted in the way that Ambiga has.

Ambiga is unique amongst the committee members in her role as a member from two marginalised positions. "She is an Indian, a non-Muslim. If Ambiga was me, these

threats targeting her would not have happened,” Samad said, highlighting how her ethnicity set her apart in the doorstep protests.

But Ambiga is also a high-profile woman leader, having previously received a string of domestic and international honours and titles, including the International Women of Courage Award from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2009.

Women leaders across the world have spoken of heightened scrutiny and gendered criticisms as they attempt to do their job, as the assumption that men and women belong in the public and private spheres respectively continues to hold steady.

In Malaysia, prospects for women are not looking any brighter. Sexist stereotypes and innuendos thrive in the political realm. Male politicians from the ruling coalition have in the past been allowed to get away with comparing women with toilets, proposing women try to enjoy being raped, and even discussing the menstrual cycle of their female colleagues in parliament.

A flippant remark from Najib’s predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi – to listen to one’s wife “only when it comes to dressing up – not on policy matters” – is illustrative of the attitude of many of the Malaysian political elite to women: that they are best in a support-role, to either her husband or children (or both).

Crucial here is the condition that women must not be outspoken. Rafidah Aziz was well-known for her direct talk, and for many years her position as the Minister of International Trade and Industry was hailed as an achievement for the status of women in Malaysia.

But a dispute in the media with former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in 2006 saw Rafidah break down in tears at one press conference. The editorial cartoon *Senyum Kambing* in local government-owned paper *Utusan Malaysia* mocked the tears of the woman it had a year before jokingly referred to as an “iron lady”.

Rafidah, once a woman known for her strength, had been revealed to be very much a woman, prone to emotional episodes, after all. She’d been broken, and the patriarchal enforcers were delighted.

The veterans’ exercises performed outside Ambiga’s house was a not-so-subtle way of raising the gender politics at play here. A group of men using sexual imagery to attack a woman is not just bizarre. It is a threat, and a reminder of the dominant hold men have over women in a patriarchal environment.

“A dangerous Hindu *woman*,” warned the Perkasa flyer, immediately warning everyone that the privileged position of those at the top of the gendered pyramid was being threatened by the outspoken woman Ambiga.

“The fate of women in this country is far better as they no longer have to fight for gender equality (like in certain countries),” Najib was quoted as saying earlier this month.

Meanwhile, young girls in Malaysia are watching what is happening to Ambiga, and trying to decide if being a leader is really something worth striving for.

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