

A woman PM? Not just yet

The Star - 30/7/2006

The youth generation is open to the idea of a woman premier but political practitioners seem to think that it is as remote as putting a Malaysian on the moon for now at least, writes JOCELINE TAN

DEPUTY Finance Minister Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen is no shrinking violet.

In fact, the medical doctor-turned-politician is on the extroverted side and can light up a gathering with her presence and personality.

The MCA Wanita leader is also no hypocrite.

When told recently that she is technically the most powerful woman in the MCA, she said rather matter-of-factly: "Actually, not technically, the post does make me the most powerful woman in the party."

But that is about as far as it goes for women in Malaysian politics.

Women may hold up half the sky and all that jazz but there is only so far that they can go in politics.

And that was why a recent survey of young people aged 18 to 32 by the Merdeka Centre think-tank stirred considerable interest among political practitioners.

One of the questions asked was on the prospect of a woman prime minister in Malaysia and about 64% of those surveyed said they were ready for it.

The gender bias seems more diluted among the youth generation.

After all, many of them had grown up watching women make it to the top in more than a few Asian states.

Recently, Han Myeong-sook became South Korea's first female Prime Minister.

And before her, there had been Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia, Gloria Arroyo and Corazon Aquino in the Philippines, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh and Indira Gandhi in India.

The mechanism by which we choose the Umno president is not very advantageous to women in the party even though they make up half of Umno. Women can be anything but not the PM — not yet, anyway.

—Adnan Yaakob



But Malaysian politicians, including women politicians, readily admit that it will not be in their lifetime.

"I have to be realistic, I just can't see it happening in my generation," said Dr Ng.

Others like Pahang Mentri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob were much more blunt.

He described the survey result as "unreasonable" and said that "it did not make sense".

But Adnan has since told *The Star*: "Don't get me wrong. I am not a male chauvinist, I am not against women in politics."

Adnan's point was not so much about women not being qualified for the post as that of the processes that determined the selection of the prime minister.

Malaysia's prime ministers have always come from Umno in accordance with one of those unwritten conventions in the country.

Whoever becomes the president of Umno also assumes the head of state post and that is one of the chief reasons why the leadership of Umno is so coveted and why everything that happens in the party is so

closely watched and analysed.

"The mechanism by which we choose the Umno president is not very advantageous to the women in the party even though they make up half of Umno. Women can be anything but not the PM — not yet, anyway," said Adnan.

But he pointed out that his tenure as Pahang Mentri Besar has seen the elevation of women state government officers to senior posts, including the first lady financial officer in the state.

"My wife still works as a school teacher. I didn't insist that she stop working just because I am the MB," he said.

Basically, the sentiment and even the election process in Umno still favour male leadership.

Besides, as some have pointed out, "the material is not there yet" or as Adnan put it, "the tradition is different here."

"Show us the candidate, then we talk about it," said Kelantan Umno information chief Datuk Alwi Che Ahmad.

Years ago, there was a move to push for the first female Mentri Besar in Negri Sembilan, a state

known for its unique matrilineal system.

The candidate was said to be Datuk Napsiah Omar, then the No 2 in Wanita Umno, but her candidature for the post was apparently scuttled by politics on the ground.

Women leaders are still largely restricted to heading the women's wings of their parties.

The exception is Parti Keadilan Nasional, which is headed by Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail; and even then, she is still largely seen as a figurehead.

In PAS, the only serious rival to Umno's dominance among the Malays, party leaders are still squabbling over whether a non-ulama can lead the party.

As MCA's Dr Ng pointed out, even the Chinese term for ambition favours the man — the term "xiong xin" translates as "heart of a man".

And while the statistics for women in a number of fields such as university graduates and professions are encouraging, there have been only a total of seven women ministers in Malaysian history.

The current Cabinet has only three women out of 32 members. There are three women deputy ministers and six parliamentary secretaries.

Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Jilil has said many times that women's progress is more meaningful when measured by the state of women's health, their economic status and legal rights than whether they have a chance at the top political post.

Her ministry played a big role in having the 9th Malaysia Plan document specifying that women should compose 30% — often described as the critical mass — of decision-mak-

ing posts in the public and private sector.

Earlier her ministry had succeeded in amending the Constitution to inculcate gender as a category that must be protected against discrimination.

"These are milestones for us," Shahrizat said.

She was rather philosophical about the notion of a woman premier: "When the time comes, it will happen."

If there is a chance for a woman to have a shot at the top job, then it will have to be a woman from Umno given the prevailing political convention.

Said Shahrizat: "I've never thought about it. If it were to be, it would be Rafidah. I really think she has the capability except that she would probably also not be interested."

But even while the men in Umno are in agreement about the superior intellect of the International Trade and Industry Minister, they were rather ambivalent about her as a political leader.

They would complain that she did not conform to their idea of a woman even as she insisted that women could not take on heavy responsibilities because they were not like men.

There was no way that Rafidah could have made it beyond her Wanita Umno chief post against such contradictions.

According to Kelantan's Alwi, the first sign that Umno may be ready to accept a woman on top will come when one of them contests for the coveted vice-president's post.

"Rafidah is approaching her *waktu asar* (past her prime) and there will never be another Rafidah. We'll have to wait and see." he said.