

# WOMEN OF THE DAP

WHAT WILL MALAYSIAN PARLIAMENT'S TRYST WITH A NEW BREED OF MPS GIVE BIRTH TO?  
by Grace Chin & Jason Tan

THREE WOMEN OF different ages, seemingly normal, sitting in the highest law-making body of the land, scrutinising government. Is this any kind of lifestyle to be leading? Chong Eng, Teresa Kok and Fong Po Kuan represent 75% of the women opposition MPs in Parliament.

A common streak runs through their veins – all can hold their own – but meeting them, you soon realise that a real if intangible something else besides debating skill binds these three quite different personalities – and it isn't the fact of their political affiliation or ethnicity. Betty Chew, Janice Lee and Violet Yong, three more women of the DAP, evince the same quality: clear and present fire.

Datin Seri Wan Azizah, the remaining 25% of Malaysian women opposition MPs, sheds light on the different women: 'I think

that they [the three women DAP MPs] have shown that they're a force to be reckoned with, especially on women's issues.

'Chong Eng speaks out more on women issues, she "springs out" of her seat whenever it is raised. Teresa, well, they have different styles. Fong Po Kuan was unfairly ousted [for being deemed to have insulted the Speaker of the House], but she stood her ground, and has come back better than before.

'Betty has done well. She shone when Guan Eng was unfairly judged and jailed. She has young kids, and her son was affected by whatever happened to her husband. They've got over that now...

'Sometimes the choices are thrust upon us,' she adds, noting both her own and Betty's sudden participation in politics. 'But other times, it is [a career choice]. Fong Po Kuan, for example,

became a politician at a very young age. She has shown and proven herself.'

'They are quite a hardy lot,' agrees Datuk Zaid Ibrahim, MP for Kota Baru and initiator of Parliament's Human Rights Caucus. 'They've proven able to withstand a lot of pressure and their vigour and competitiveness has made Parliament more passionate about issues. Women's issues are generally wide and broad,' notes Zaid, 'and women's perspectives and input are important because sometimes laws are made with many assumptions.'

But the point of women, and not men, must also be about effectiveness as an MP. To what extent have the opposition women MPs been able to drive change? That depends. When you are the opposition your perspectives are different. It's not always about the issues themselves. It's also what you say, how you say it, who you want to pursue it with... and if you do it right. I think the issue isn't the most important of all. Its presentation is also very important.'

'For all the women NGOs in the country, they have been our consistent friends and partners in raising issues affecting women's rights in Parliament,' says Zainah Anwar of the three women MPs. 'They are ready to learn, extremely hardworking and they always do their homework to prepare themselves to engage in substantive debate.

'Amending the Constitution is not easy,' acknowledges Zainah of the quest to enshrine women's rights into the laws of the land. She concurs with Zaid on the need to be tactical and strategic. 'To be fair to them, the women ministers in the Government also played an important role. It was [Datuk] Sharizat who presented the recommended amendment to the Cabinet, which acknowledged it. They all play very important roles too.

Zainah notes too a seeming 'disconnect from political will and commitment with the actual implementation.

'The Prime Minister has been very supportive of the women's rights and gender equality, but whatever political commitment must have enough weight to see that the discrimination ends. When will we ever be a moderate Muslim country and a progressive Muslim country at the same time?' she asks, brushing aside the common gender villains, 'culture' and 'religion'.

'The women's movement is not just about women, it is about men in politics, too. Parliament and politics are made of people who will shape and lead public opinion for the country. And this is important – awareness and changes must be made there, not reinforcement of the discrimination.'

And so we begin the story of DAP's three-part female harmony (with backing choir) in a Malaysian Parliament where it is not unknown for an off-key 'C' to wiggle between 'M' and 'P'.



PICTURE BY VINOD NAIK

TERESA KOK NEVER thought of joining politics, or becoming an MP even though when she was in Universiti Sains Malaysia, she was 'quite an activist' in the Chinese Society and 'witnessed injustice and unfair practises on campus'. She studied mass communication, minoring in political science; the course content and her lecturers would nudge her along her yet unseen path.

It was during the 1990 General Elections, 'when Tengku Razaleigh and his Semangat 46 came up to the DAP to form the Gagasan Rakyat' that she became influenced by the desire of the Chinese community 'to support the Opposition, to build up the two-party system'.

She had just graduated and did not join the DAP, but helped the party to campaign. It was that experience that 'opened up' her mind. DAP's loss of the Penang State Assembly by three seats 'had an impact' on her, so when '[DAP chief Lim] Kit Siang's secretaries had become MPs, and they were looking for new people, I came in together with Teng Chang Khim.'

We meet her on a Sunday, not long after the international ear squat incident. She tells us that after this, she is due to meet 'Iranian guys who claim they were bullied.' Such is the life of a woman Opposition MP? Excerpts from our interview:

#### Can you describe briefly the Malaysian political environment from the perspective of a woman opposition MP?

I'd like to take the Parliament as a reflection of society... Most of us women Opposition MPs are in our second term now. We are no more green MPs. There are still a few 'naughty boys' of UMNO who see us as easy targets to bully and make fun of, but there is less sexual harassment than from the last term.

Maybe this is because the present MPs are more professional; they are more civilized and more educated. They are more eloquent in their speeches and debates compared to [their predecessors].

M Kula Segaran (Teluk Intan) said the other day that when women like us stand up in the House, somehow 'those guys' would refrain from making improper remarks.

When we stand up to rebut or debate, they will give way a bit, maybe because we are women or we are younger. The kind of restraint on their part shouldn't be confused with respect, though. Because they sometimes still do make naughty remarks.

For instance, [Fong] Po Kuan was recently very combative in the way she delivered her speech. Datuk Badruddin Amiruldin (Jerai) asked Kerk Kim Hock (Kota Melaka), 'If you're not married, would you marry her?' Po Kuan stood up and demanded that he retract the statement and apologise.

It still happens, although they can now feel embarrassed by the media exposure as well as the disapproval from their own ranks.

**Do you think that the men MP's perception of the Opposition women MPs has changed?** I relate to them well... we talk about everything. For example, [Datuk] Azmi Khalid. Sometimes when I wear baju kebaya and if he sees me at the MP's lounge, he and all these guys will pay us a lot of attention. They have this perception of what DAP women, or rather of what Chinese women are like, so maybe they can relate to us better when I wear Baju Melayu. But of course I do not wear it all the time!

I managed to lobby some of them [the male MPs] to speak up for Beatrice Fernandez, on the MAS air stewardess issue. I was speaking to Sri Gading [Datuk Bung Mokhtar?], the one who likes to bully us, that outspoken chap. Before the debate on the Women's Affairs Ministry, I was saying, 'How can, ask them [the MAS stewardesses] to stop work at the age of 40? You look at Sharizat, more than 50 years old and still so pretty and young, still so capable, how can you ask her to stop work? And so he really went in and talked about it! He said, Tolonglah, a lot of these air stewardess are Melayu. You are also making us Melayu suffer also!

#### What about your perception of male MPs; has it changed over the years?

There is a new breed of MPs who are doctors, lawyers, and professionals... Datuk Zaid Ibrahim (Kota Bahru), multi-millionaire, runs the biggest legal firm in Southeast Asia. Datuk Dr Rahman Ismail (Gombak), is a specialist in the medical field, and even the backbenchers club, which used to have jokers of the first class, now has Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad, a former minister and an intellectual and critical person. Now the boys in the club are better behaved, compared to before when they were there to just make fun of us, shout, or to run us down. They still do that now, but are more restrained with themselves. Now that we are dealing with more intellectual and reasonable people who also see that there are problems with government agencies and how things are being done, I find that I can relate to them better.

#### Do you think this change is influenced by the Pak Lah administration?

Yes. For example, even Lim Kit Siang, the Opposition leader, is no longer like the Opposition leader he was 20 years ago. We are talking now about working with BN, working with Pak Lah against corruption. It is not as antagonistic as before. And we also have a minister who is in charge of Parliament [Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz], who is in Parliament all the time, and is much more approachable.

At the Conference on Good Governance, Democracy and Asean organised by the Burma Caucus, Datuk Nazri spoke in front of foreigners, saying, 'Well, our Prime Minister asked me not to treat the Opposition as enemies, but to engage them, and to be patient with them.'

#### RUMBLINGS FROM THAT INCIDENT

The real issue is about the abuse of human rights. For me to persuade those four Chinese nationals to make a police report was so difficult! But when I managed to get it publicised, I am blamed, and these girls are blamed. Blamed by who [and for what]? Blamed by people who run pubs and karaoke lounges. They think that we have offended the police and they are now being raided every day. It ruins their business.

I was having a drink at a friend's house and her relative was telling me, 'Aiyah now all the Chinese suffer because of the issues that were brought up. The Chinese hawkers, you know, all used to take bribes, now all cannot already!'

Now, even if we amend the law to restrict the power of the police force, but if there is no mechanism and if there is no place for people to air their complaints and curb the power of the police, this is what you get.

I was the one who persuaded and helped those Chinese nationals who were unfairly detained because of their suspected fake passports - but now they are being blamed by their fellow Chinese countrymen, as well as by those people in the entertainment industry [for causing trouble].

Actually I am glad that this whole issue [came up for the tacit support I've received]. We can see that the Cabinet ministers are talking about reforming the police force [and] the police are a bit angry that all the politicians are getting into their 'business', so now they are flexing their [muscles]...

I will say that the police PR is very poor, and they are very arrogant in handling these series of issues. It is very difficult for us to complain against the police; they will deny it, because they have to protect their own.

I believe this has an impact also; this is the reason that we felt we should work with all parties, on all issues, such as when we worked on the Burma Caucus, we had Zaid Ibrahim. We had the Human Rights Caucus, led by Nazri himself.

But there are some UMNO guys who are still intolerant of the Opposition, especially the DAP. A few of them are still retrogressive and racial-minded, and are not willing to change.

#### What are the demands placed on you by constituents?

[Some] people demand me to be more articulate and intellectual, [others], as long as you see to their blocked drains or enjoy durians by the roadside with them, they will be very happy. As for women-folk, whenever we bring out issues related to women, the [same range of] constituents will support me too. This cuts across all classes, and maybe across races, but my constituency is 89% Chinese.

#### How close do you think the issue of women's rights is to non-Chinese women? How do non-Chinese women relate to you and your cause?

Maybe they know me but they might not know what I am fighting for. Malay and

Indian women are not very aware of their rights. If we look at the Ibu Tunggal issue, many of them are Malay and Indian women, mostly from the rural areas. It is mostly religion, social, and cultural norms that have made them ignorant or deterred them from knowing their rights, and they are unable to break away from [these values].

I doubt if I'm able to handle issues like these, and perhaps I'm not the best person to do it. This task [creating awareness] is no joke at all; you have to go to them and conduct seminars and the like. You also need a Malay woman, perhaps the best is an ustazah (female religious teacher).

When we wanted to form the Parliamentary Women Caucus after the remarks and bullying from the male MPs, we invited the PAS Muslimat to join in, and [Datin Seri] Wan Azizah (PKRM-Permatang Pauh), too. But all the women BN MPs didn't want to come in, except for Dr Ng Yen Yen (MCA-Raub).

The reaction of the PAS Muslimat was, Oh, working with NGOs ah? The NGOs are those who are prone to Western ideas; they encourage abortion and free sex!

And so, I am not equipped to go to rural areas to tell Malay women of their rights, which is why the Sisters in Islam are important; this is a role which they can take up to, but even SIS are only able to move about in urban areas.

#### **What are the women's issues that most need urgent attention in Malaysia?**

Childcare. Childcare centres are not a popular concept here as compared to Western countries. All city halls in Scandinavian countries have their own child care centres. Do our city halls have that? If a family has two kids, they will send their children to nannies in the neighbourhood. It costs RM500 per child, so it comes to RM1,000 a month, can you imagine that? You might as well take care of the child yourself! This has deterred women from coming out to the work force.

Take China, for instance. Their childcare centres are run by the government and so popular. Their women can come out to work.

And secondly, our GLCs. For example, MAS. I really cannot tahan that they impose an age limit of 40 years old for the service of their air stewardesses, and for men, it is 55! They treat the women as if they are GROs – you must be young, pretty, and slim. If after having children and you cannot fit into your uniform anymore, you will get sacked; that is what we read in the papers. They will take away your work pass from the time you are two months pregnant, and return it only after your confinement period. And in that eight months you will be without pay.

We have to live up to what we believe. If Parliament has amended Article 8 of our Federal Constitution, it must be implemented. We shouldn't let our GLCs to get away with it – our national carrier some more!

#### **Back to childcare centres: why do you think the idea of childcare centres is not taking off?**

This is because the Government still does not take this seriously; it is not important for them. We still depend a lot on migrant workers. When we go to work, we hire an Indonesian maid to take care of our children; it is cheaper that way. In a childcare centre with well-trained nannies, as they are in European countries, who know child psychology, your children can be taught to be more sociable when interacting with others etc... your children are taught these skills they are young and they will be better citizens in the future.

#### **Do you think the average Malaysian woman is aware of this issue of childcare centres and the need to get involved in politics to initiate these changes?**

My constituency is 89% Chinese, so I'll use the example of a Chinese Malaysian woman. It is very difficult to get urban people involved in politics, male or female. For instance, how many offer their services to the resident's association? Try and get them to pay their maintenance fees; even that is difficult. Do you think they will want to join political parties? Or the DAP? Selling Rocket papers? Go for demonstrations?

We have to do all this tedious work that the middle-class professionals are not interested in doing. The monetary rewards, compared to the effort that you put in is imbalanced. We work for seven days a week. Even the Chinese women [who were detained], I had to go there and meet them, they did not come to me. You spend so much time, money, and effort. If you're a lawyer or a doctor, would this be worth the time? If you know your constituents personally, you will know that you are appreciated, but if you ask them to get involved, they won't.

And also, in politics, you need a lot of patience. You have to swallow the ridiculous demands of your grassroots' members and constituents, [such as] that you must attend this funeral of this supporter's relative or you are not giving them 'face'. Most people will not want this. People prefer to spend their Sundays at home and relax and have quality time instead.

#### **Who or what is the role model of Malaysian women?**

A lot of women want glamour and attention in life. I am not a role model for most Malaysian women. The ideal picture of most women is of a supportive family and good children, and if sometimes you do charitable acts, that's good enough.

People think that I always criticise the Government, [and] being in politics and in the Opposition party, people think you cannot find a husband. I think this impression is bad. I see myself more as a social activist, acting on my conscience and

doing what I think is right. They see people like me as, Wah maybe get jailed under ISA, masuk polis lockup.

But having women in the party and articulating the issues has drawn more women to the party. It has changed the image of the party, and also changed the perception of what a woman politician can be.

#### **So who is your role model, then? Do you have one?**

Lim Kit Siang! Because he works for DAP 24 hours a day!

#### **LEGISLATIVE AMENDMENTS**

- The enactment of The Employment Act 1955 to provide better working conditions for women;
- Amendments to the Income Tax Act 1967 provide an option to married women to have separate income tax assessment;
- The adoption of the Women and Girls' Protection Act 1973 and its 1987 amendments. In 2000, The Women and Girls Protection Act 1973 and The Child Protection Act 1991 were reviewed and streamlined into the Child Act 2000;
- Amendments to the Penal Code in 1989, 2002 and 2003 to enhance the penalties for offences relating to rape, prostitution and incest;
- The introduction of the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Handling of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace on 7 March 1999 to prevent and eradicate sexual harassment at the workplace;
- The enactment of the Domestic Violence Act in 1994 and the review of the Act to examine the difficulties in obtaining the Interim Protection Order, the power of judges and the need for counselling for victims as well as the lack of understanding of the provisions under the Act;
- Amendments to the Distribution Act 1958 in 1997 to repeal the distinction between wives and husbands in terms of the distribution of the estate of an intestate to the surviving spouse;
- Amendments to the Guardianship of Infants Act 1961 in 1999 to give legal recognition to the parental rights of mothers;
- The Immigration Act was amended in 2001 to allow foreign men married to Malaysian women to renew their social visit pass every six months until they gain employment;
- Amendment to the Pensions Act 1980 in 2002 to allow widows to continue receiving pensions even after they remarried;
- The Universities and University Colleges Act of 1991 stipulates equal access to educational opportunities for both male and female Malaysians.

SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC