



Breaking The Glass Ceiling

The recent upheaval in Selangor over the post of the Menteri Besar has suddenly led the country to a situation where we might soon be witnessing a major breakthrough in the glass ceiling for women in politics.

Over the years we have seen women slowly occupying positions in the political arena. Data from the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry shows that in 2013 women made up only 13.1% of local councillors, 28.8% of senators, 11.3% state legislative assembly members, 10.4% members of parliament and 12.3% of Cabinet ministers and deputy ministers.

The Malaysian Government made a commitment in the 9th Malaysia Plan to ensure 30% representation of women in decision-making positions by 2010. The reality for women in politics is that it is an ongoing struggle to break the boundaries of misogyny and patriarchy in politics, a particularly male-dominated arena. Now, an opportunity has indeed arisen in Selangor and there is a possibility of a woman Menteri Besar in Selangor.

A woman leader of a state government would be a momentous breakthrough in Malaysian politics and perhaps even pave the way for a woman prime minister sometime in the future. It would encourage other women to venture into full-time politics and transform male-centric and sexist thinking within politics.

It might also force a reassessment of party politics, which has up till now seen mainstream political parties in Malaysia divided into male-dominated party leadership positions and women's wings.

The entry of sufficient numbers of women into politics, especially in decision-making positions, can broaden and redefine the national political agenda and transform the very nature of politics. This is especially so if the women leaders, in addition to their experiences, are committed to principles of good governance including transparency, accountability and inclusiveness.

These principles should be the minimum expectations of all our leaders, irrespective of their gender or political party affiliations.

The question of competency often arises when a women leader is mooted. While competency is important, we note that it is rarely brought into question when male leaders are nominated for key positions such as state legislative assembly members, members of parliament or for ministerial posts.

Another issue which rears its ugly head when women leaders are put forward is family connections and political patronage. This is a reality which holds true even for many male leaders and is a practice seen in many countries. Good governance practices and selections based on merit, if adhered to, would slowly see the end of this.

We look to the day where leaders and decision-makers will be chosen based on their competence and their adherence to good governance principles and not be held back because of their gender.

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26 August 2014

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