

MALAYSIANS DESERVE MORE WOMEN IN CABINET, 23 MAY 2013

The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) congratulates the seven women appointed as ministers and deputy ministers in Prime Minister Dato' Sri Najib Razak's newly formed Cabinet. The marginal presence of women however, is extremely disappointing. Out of the 35 full ministerial positions only two, or 5.7%, have been filled by women. This falls far short of the government's own target of women comprising at least 30% of decision-making positions.

Women representation in Najib Razak's cabinet has been consistently poor. In each of the 2009, 2010, and now 2013 cabinets, there have only been two women ministers, with this number dropping to one briefly when the Prime Minister appointed himself placeholder Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development. There were three women ministers in Tun Abdullah Badawi's 2004 cabinet.

Worse, the percentage of women ministers has decreased across Najib Razak's three cabinets. While the number of ministerial posts have increased from 32 in 2008, to 33 in 2009, to 35 in 2013, the number of women ministers has remained stagnant at two. In its election manifesto, Barisan Nasional made a pledge of "increasing the number of women participating in national decision making". This was Najib's first opportunity to fulfil this promise and lead by example; his failure to do so reflect his priorities, or lack thereof.

The importance of appointing more women to the cabinet cannot be underestimated.

Appointing women to high political positions acquaints voters to women in leadership. In 1993, an amendment to India's constitution mandated that one out of three village councils be randomly reserved for women pradhans (head of council). A study found that these villages were more likely to elect women pradhans in future unreserved elections, compared to villages that had never been reserved.

Having more women in cabinet will help ensure that the diversity of issues important to women do not remain sidelined. Despite numerous calls by women's group, gender budgeting has not been implemented, nor has CEDAW been incorporated into our legal system. When will the regressive Islamic Family Law Act 2006 that discriminates against Muslim women be amended? When will the definition of rape in law include rape with an object and marital rape? When will the Domestic Violence Act be amended to cover intimate partner relationships? Women, who make up half the electorate and half the population of this country, deserve to have fair representation in policy-making bodies.

Having more women in the cabinet can also help improve good governance. There is evidence that women political leaders support policies that benefit the public more than their male counterparts. Moreover, gender-balanced teams are collectively smarter and make better decisions than predominantly male teams. All Malaysians will benefit, not just women.

The low number of women in the top table of politics mirrors the scarcity of women in leadership in many areas of public life, including politics, the judiciary, and in business. The Prime Minister will be hard-pressed trying to convince the public and private sectors on the importance of meeting the minimum 30% target of women in decision-making positions, when he himself is unable to walk the talk.

The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG)