

Analysis: Women holding some key ministries a good start

KUALA LUMPUR: The 15th general election (GE15) was pivotal in many ways.

Not only did it see the first hung parliament in Malaysian history, it also saw the defeat of some big political names by some political rookies.

In the end, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was appointed as the 10th prime minister on Nov 24 to lead a so-called unity government consisting of Pakatan Harapan (PH), Barisan Nasional (BN), Gabung Parti Sarawak (GPS) and Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS).

(In political science, a unity government would not have an opposition. Since Perikatan Nasional has refused to join and instead chose to play an opposition role, Anwar's government is actually a mixed government or coalition government)

The new Cabinet has its own share of firsts: it is the first Cabinet with a deputy Prime Minister from East Malaysia, on top of six ministers from Sabah and Sarawak.

However, women remain underrepresented with only five women ministers in the 28-strong Cabinet. Historically, there has never been more than five women serving in the Cabinet at any given time.

"(This is the) reality; we have to admit it is not possible (to have more women ministers) given the number of women as candidates and winners. It's frustrating but given the circumstances, I think it is understandable," said Dr Zaireeni Azmi, senior lecturer in gender studies programme at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

Despite that, analysts and activists are not disheartened. For one thing, it is the first time women are holding Law, Health and Education ministries, three major portfolios in the government. The experts also think efforts to improve female participation in political decision-making should not stop there.

The other portfolios women hold are the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

WOMEN LEADERS

Malaysia has made a commitment to increase more women in all sectors of public life for over a decade, but the results have been a mixed bag.

According to the **Department of Statistics Malaysia**, women have eclipsed men in education, almost achieved parity in healthcare access, but are lagging behind in the labour market. When it comes to political decision-making, women in Malaysia are severely underrepresented despite making up about 50 per cent of the population.

GE15 did not see an increase in the number of women representatives in Parliament with only 31 women elected, comprising 13.9 per cent of parliament, but instead saw a decrease from the 33 women who were voted in at the 2018 general election (GE14). A total of 127 women out of a total of 945 candidates contested for parliamentary seats in GE15.

The target is to have at least 30 per cent of women in decision-making positions. In the Cabinet, women make up 18 per cent of it.

Nevertheless, analysts and activists are choosing to see the silver lining.

"Visibility is important, and it's a positive step in the right direction to see more women holding key ministerial positions, even if it does fall short of the minimum 30 per cent mark. This is especially so for the health and education ministries, which have never been helmed by women before," said Suriani Kempe, women's rights advocate and president of Family Frontiers.

She added the ministers should receive all the support, resources and tools as well as cooperation from their staff needed to ensure they delivered.

The timing of women helming the Law, Health and Education ministries is significant, coming at a time when the country has been facing many issues involving women within these sectors, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the recovery period.

The pandemic and lockdowns have affected women disproportionately. The citizenship issue of children born overseas to Malaysian mothers came to a head because of the pandemic, when many women were forced to choose between their non-citizen children and their families in Malaysia when borders were closed to non-Malaysians. Newly-minted Law Minister Datuk Seri Azalina Othman Said has voiced her intention to tackle the issue.

As for the Health and Education ministries, the majority of healthcare workers and teachers in Malaysia are women. Despite being the majority of healthcare workers, women's health issues are not as centered as men's.

The Education Ministry has also faced its own set of challenges, including accusations of being slow to respond to students' complaints, among other things.

On the first woman to be appointed as Education Minister, Zaireeni said: "It will be good to see a woman's touch in (helming) the Education Ministry, taking care of our kids in primary and secondary schools."

PROVIDING BALANCE

During GE15, all the major coalitions – PH, BN and Perikatan Nasional (PN) – had initiatives aimed at empowering and assisting women, and improving gender parity in their campaign platform.

Although women helm three key ministries in the government, analysts and advocates say there is still much that needs to be done to achieve the promises made during the elections. Many analysts and advocates suggest appointing more young and professional women as deputy ministers and senators, as well as in other sectors, such as government-linked companies (GLC) and government-linked investment companies (GLIC).

The number of women in these sectors has never broken 30 per cent.

Political analyst Assoc Prof Dr Sharifah Syahirah Syed Shikh, who is also the Honorary Assistant Secretary at the National Council of Women's Organisations, told Bernama the incoming administration has the chance to implement the necessary changes that have been slow in coming, such as including more women in political decision-making.

"This is the time for all parties to nominate and also to suggest women senators so that we can balance the absence of women (overall) and the lack of women in the Dewan Rakyat," she said.

As for GLC and GLIC, activists want the government to appoint capable women to helm these companies in higher numbers, and not to reward political allies.

However, Zaireeni admitted even with appointments, Malaysia is unlikely to reach the 30 per cent target within the next few years.

"It's a slow process, maybe not in the next five years. But we're hoping to get more senators, more in the ministries and GLCs," she said.

She added the women appointed should not be tokens – appointed based only on gender and not her qualifications and abilities – noting that doing so would be defeating the purpose of empowering women.

On top of that, activists also say the top-down method, that is, appointing female senators to make up for the lack of women in political representation, should not be a permanent solution. Instead, they hope this method will pave the way for more women getting politically involved after proving they are capable leaders, and standing and winning elections on their own merit.

However, Parliwomen public relations and marketing director Anis Sufea Ismail cautioned that this method may not necessarily increase women's presence in political leadership roles.

"It's not as simple as once you are appointed and you are able to prove that you can do the job, then (you) will be able to continue gaining that support. There needs to be more done in terms of maintaining ... the position that (you) have and the belief of the people that women can lead," she said.

She emphasized that with the advent of social media, leaders not only have to be able to do the job, they must also be seen to be able to do the job by their voters, not just certain segments of people.

Yeh reason women leaders are in such short supply in Malaysia could be because women have not been given a chance to excel. But it could also mean Malaysians are not ready to accept women leaders.

There is no escaping the fact that there are fewer women MPs in the 15th Parliament than the one before.

Zaireeni said the test to see whether the trend goes toward more women in power or not is coming sooner than expected, in the form of state elections (PRN) of Selangor, Penang, Negeri Sembilan, Kelantan, Kedah and Terengganu.

"What we're going to see is the PRN, whether they have more women as candidates and after that, how many will be appointed as Exco," Zaireeni said.

She added the states are currently under PH rule, which has shown more willingness to nominate female candidates and commitment to women-friendly policies.

Nevertheless, activists agree that having more women in leadership roles will help encourage women to get involved politically and to advocate for and represent women-friendly policies in government.

Suriani hopes as time goes by, Malaysians will become more used to and accept women in leadership positions.

"The strength of diversity in our leadership means that women are able to raise issues that men may not consider important - this is key if our leadership is meant to represent all Malaysians," Suriani said.
—BERNAMA

<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2022/12/858840/analysis-women-holding-some-key-ministries-good-start>