The Hazy New Dawn:
Democracy, Women and Politics in Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

Held coincidentally with International Women's Day on March 8, 2008, the outcome of the 12th General Election in Malaysia marked a critical turn in the politics of the nation. For the first time since Independence in 1957, the three main opposition parties took over power in five of the 13 states in the country, also denying the ruling coalition a two-thirds majority of 222 seats in the federal parliament. Their campaign cry which accompanied this victory was 'a promise of a new dawn' under a coalition framework of multi-ethnic politics and democracy.

Malaysia's governance system is three-tiered with the federal government at the top of the hierarchy, followed by the state legislature and the local government which falls under the jurisdiction of the respective state governments. In 1976, local council elections were suspended with members of local councils being appointed, usually on the basis of political patronage. Basically, Malaysia has a federal system; nonetheless some call it one of the most centralized federal systems in the world (Loh, 2009). Since 1957, the federal parliament has been under the control of the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), a coalition of 14 component parties, until of course the 2008 general elections.

The shock win by the Opposition in five states, led many political pundits, both mainstream and independent, to shout that a new dawn had emerged in the country's political scenario. For the first time, the Peoples' Justice Party (PKR), a multi-ethnic party won 31 Parliamentary seats over and above those won by the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP).[1] These parties now come under a loose coalition called *Pakatan Rakyat* (Peoples' Pact). As written by Dr. Mohamed Ariff, the Executive Director of the government linked Malaysian Institute of Economic Research:

> Times have changed for sure. So have mindsets and paradigms. Malaysian politics will never be the same again. Malaysians are no longer afraid of changes, now that the ghost of May 1969 has been exorcised and banished. It is indeed heartening that Malaysia has come of age, with its people looking beyond mundane issues transcending ethnic boundaries, focusing on such loftier concerns as institutional integrity, social justice and civil rights (New Straits Times, April 28 2008).

Not only was this critical juncture seen as a triumph of multi-ethnic politics, it was also perceived by civil society, as opening the doors towards participatory democracy for its citizens -- a space long denied by the previous regime. Indeed, in the last 50 years, most progressive women and the autonomous women's movement, while engaging the state through advocacy in legislative reform, consciously decided to be 'out' of the corridors of power (Ng, Maznah and tan, 2006; tan and Ng, 2003).

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[1] For further analysis of the snap 12th General Elections, see Ooi, Johan and Lee (2008). Malaysian politics has always been dominated by politics based on ethnicity, and more recently the politicization of religion, particularly Islam (Gomez, 2004, 2008; Kahn and Loh, ed. 1992)). Despite the presence of a vocal, albeit small women's movement, women's rights and gender equality have basically taken a back seat in the country's political struggle (Ng, Maznah and tan, 2006). See Rashila (1998) for a discussion on the obstacles facing women in politics.

However, with these changed conditions, several women and men, many from or associated with the women's movement and civil society, became involved, almost overnight in institutionalized politics. They were elected as Members of Parliament or the State Assembly or appointed as councilors at the municipal level in at least two of the states (Selangor and Penang) under the control of two of the opposition parties – the Peoples' Justice Party (PKR) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). These two parties have long espoused the involvement of women in politics. The PKR recently amended their constitution to adopt a quota of at least 30 per cent representation for women in decision making positions, while the Socialist Youth Section of DAP took a similar stance several years ago.

Democratic transitions to make the regimes, practices and discourses of deeply entrenched public power more transparent, accountable and responsive are difficult processes. Rai (2008) has termed this an unfolding and untidy process. In the past few decades of democratic upheaval, feminist researchers alongside the women's movement(s) have also demanded women's rightful place in the democratic process (Vargas and Olea, 1999; Goetz and Shireen, 2002). As part of the debates on inclusive citizenship, they have argued for both descriptive and substantive representation of women in the political arena. The struggle towards democratic change and gender equality takes place at many levels in the substantive, structural and cultural arenas. But often times new policy advocates, especially women, face more barriers, particularly when gender regimes and cultures are masculinist in nature (Sweetman, 1997).

This paper takes stock of the experiences of these new Malaysian women activist-politicians in addressing women's substantive representation in the political arena. I discuss these dynamics using Selangor and Penang states as sites of this new struggle over women's power and recognition. Selangor and Penang are ruled by the *Pakatan Rakyat* coalition, while, as noted above, the *Barisan Nasional* is in control of the federal government. The first part of the paper examines the literature on gender, politics and democracy and how these have been manifested in the regional and national context. This is followed by a description of the study cites and the research process. Part three has several sub-sections which discuss the opportunities and challenges encountered by these new policy advocates, as well as the institutional and cultural factors that might constrain the struggle towards women's agency and rights. It argues that these contestations go beyond the male-female divide and gendered power relations. Important as these factors are, other critical forces influence whether these actors have succeeded in realizing their vision of change. Women's other identities such as ethnicity, location and age, intersect with their gender identity, impacting on how the 'new' politics of change are being negotiated. Using these findings, the conclusion reverts back to the overall theme of the critical relationship between gender, politics and democracy.

WOMEN, POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY

As defined by Rai (2008:59), democratization is the 'process of making democratic regimes, practices and discourses of public power'. She also points out that other authors have different insights into this political process, including interrogating the nature of the institutional form of democracy, the causes and contexts of democracy and the engagement of civil society with such institutions, to name but a few. Lovenduski (2005: 13 and 26) for example argues that politics is the 'personnel, processes, relationships, institutions and procedures that make authoritative public decisions', while political institutions are 'organizations, formal and informal rules, processes and procedures through which politics is

done'. Other scholars, in their take on citizenship focus on politics and power and the extent whereby social agents, agencies and institutions have the capacity to maintain or transform their environment, social or physical. These are articulated in the activities of cooperation, negotiation and struggle over the use and distribution of resources (Held, 1987 in Lister, 1997). Most of these frameworks mainly focus on states and individuals in the public political sphere.

Although democracy is premised on the idea of universal citizenship where everyone has the right to be treated equally under the law, feminist scholars have criticised the notion of citizenship as being deeply gendered, if not racialised, as it basically reflects the abstract, disembodied citizen who is male, white, heterosexual and non-disabled (Molyneux and Shahra, 2002; Yuval-Davis and Werbner, 1999; Lister, 1997). While women have made headway in employment, for example, their involvement in the sphere of political participation is the weakest. The invisibility of women's political activism also reflects the tendency to define politics within the masculine sphere of formal politics. Hence another well-known feminist critique asserts that the exclusion of the private (read domestic) domain where women are located, if not thrust, was critical for the primacy and importance of the public political arena. Women and feminist writers argued for the (re-) definition of politics to include both the public and private spheres, thus contributing and challenging the discourse and practice of what is male-stream politics and democracy (Rai, 2008)

In the context of inclusive citizenship and the democratic right to participate in state and society, there have been calls for women's increased political representation, both in terms of descriptive and later of substantive representation (Phillips, 1995; Dahlerup, 2006, 2005). Descriptive representation is mainly about the numbers of women in politics, while substantive representation is about emphasizing what an elected individual thinks and does, rather than focusing on who the person is (Tremblay 2006). Hence one of the recommended strategies to acknowledge women's 'political citizenship' was to implement quotas for women to overcome current and historical prejudices that prevent the entry of women into decision-making positions. This model of 'fast tracking' to redress the historic exclusion of women has proven successful as more and more countries all over the world are adopting various kinds of quotas to strive for more women's representation, particularly in the field of politics as well as in the board room (Krook, 2007).[2] It has since been recognized that both women's descriptive and substantive representation are important and should complement each other in relation to advancing women's rights and overcoming unequal gender power relations in any society. Put differently descriptive representation and substantive representation should not be seen as exclusive of each other as numbers do count as is the position of the representative – the critical actor – on women's issues.

Malaysia has not been left out of these debates with the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) announcing, but falling short of legislating, the policy of at least 30 per cent women in decision making positions in the country. In measuring the Malaysian Gender Gap Index, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development in collaboration with the United Nations Development Program revealed that despite Malaysian women's better educational opportunities and improved health status, they were still far behind in relation to economic and political empowerment (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2007). Besides Malaysia, other countries in the region such as Indonesia adopted affirmative

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[2]   The obsession with numbers – usually the 30 percent critical mass – has also been critiqued (Dahlerup, 2006, 2005). For a useful summary of the debates see Tan (forthcoming).

action in the Election Law requiring that a minimum of 30 percent of total candidates of a political party should be women. Unfortunately no legal sanctions were imposed by those parties which did not abide by this ruling (Ani, 2004). Apparently Asia has a weaker proportion of gender quotas compared to the other continents (Tremblay and Steele, 2009).

So where do women and democracy fit in with each other in the context of democratic transition? And particularly so when established, usually male-dominated institutions have the utmost capacity to preserve tradition and old ways of working so as to prevent or slow change and protect the elites of the previous regime. Institutions are said to have their own distinctive cultures. Thus it has been argued that it is not easy for new policy advocates to lobby and institutionalise changes as new policies do not automatically translate into institutional practice. In fact executive policies are 'routinely ignored or undermined' as they filter down the bureaucratic hierarchies, alongside their informal power relations (Staudt, 1998). The interesting paper by Goetz and Shireen (2002) showed the dramatic increase of women's representation in national and local politics in the context of transition from authoritarianism in South Africa and Uganda. However in comparing the two countries it also showed how women in South Africa fared better due to the long engagement of the women's rights movement with the African National Congress (ANC) where internal democracy is more institutionalised compared to that in Uganda. They noted that, "In South Africa, women demanded inclusion as a *right*; in Uganda, inclusion has been extended as a *favour*" (Goetz and Shireen, 2002: 339).

In her study on gender and institutions, Staudt (1998:65) asserts that new policies linked with women's concerns face even greater barriers due to 'demographics, power dynamics of under representation, and the institutionalisation of male interests in states and bureaucracies'. Sweetman (1997:3) develops an analytical framework to examine the issue of gender in the context of development organizations. She emphasizes that it is important to consider 'three interdependent elements: the substantive (laws or organizational policies); the structural (processes and mechanisms to enforce the substantive level); and the cultural (beliefs and attitudes held by wider society, including the women and men who work in the organization'). She points out that although gender policies are in place, they tend to evaporate at the structural level of organizations, which are the procedures, activities and regulations, which translate an organization's purpose into outcomes. An important reason for this policy evaporation is the cultural element, comprising the beliefs and attitudes of the individuals involved in the work, particularly those who have the power to facilitate or impede institutional change. Women entering new electoral politics would probably encounter similar obstacles.

In the Malaysian context, this 'new politics' of the day – that of participatory democracy, transparency and accountability - which emerged in the 1999 politics of *Reformasi*[3] is today deeply enmeshed with and into the 'old' politics of cronyism and patronage (Loh, 2009; Loh and Johan, 2003). The attempts to mitigate their electoral losses came almost immediately with the *Barisan Nasional* federal government systematically preventing financial resources as well as the devolution of political power to *Pakatan controlled* state and local levels, especially in Penang and Selangor. There are numerous examples of how federal funds are

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[3]   *Reformasi* was the battle cry of the then deposed Deputy Minister Anwar Ibrahim who led a movement for reforms against the regime of the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. Anwar was imprisoned for six years under charges of corruption. Upon release in 2004 he led the opposition coalition towards the political tsunami of the 2008 general election.

bypassing these states and being given instead to state located federal set ups, or how these state *Pakatan* leaders are being prevented from gracing events at public schools (Loh, 2009). The Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak in the recent opening of an UMNO branch asserted, 'Selangor is the pulse of the nation and as such, it must return to the *Barisan Nasional* fold … don't just say you want to win it. If you want to win it, you must do what is necessary' (*New Straits Times*, 10 August 2009).

Given the above configurations, this paper examines the dynamics between democratic transitions and gender equality by examining and discussing why these new women and men activist-politicians participate in the democratisation processes, as well as the opportunities and obstacles to such involvement, particularly in the arena of women's rights and gender equality. What are the outcomes for them since they joined the field of representative institutionalised politics? Have they succeeded, failed or are the results more ambivalent, depending on the specific contexts?

RESEARCH PROCESS

As mentioned earlier the states of Selangor and Penang were selected as the two study sites. Selangor has 51 state assembly persons (ADUNs) of which eight (15.6 per cent) are women while Penang has 40 state assembly persons out of which three (7.5 per cent) are women. Each state has 10 Executive Committee (Exco) members who are basically the state cabinet representing various portfolios. They make executive decisions at the state level. Selangor has a woman Exco in charge of Welfare, Women's Affairs, Technology and Innovation while the counterpart in Penang is the Exco portfolio of Youth and Sports, Women, Family and Community Development.[4]

There are 12 local councils in Selangor with a total of about 288+ councilors out of which about 10 per cent are women; while in Penang there are two local councils with eight women (16.6 per cent) out of a total of 48 councilors.[5] Local councils are headed by a Mayor who is appointed by the Federal government. Councilors are normally appointed by whoever is in control of the state government. In line with the new state government directives, ADUNs can no longer serve as councilors, a practice in the previous Barisan regime which apparently gave rise to lack of accountability and corruption. As such the 25 or so councilors in each locality represent the interests of the *Pakatan Rakyat* parties (PKR, DAP and PAS) as well as the NGO and local community.

For the first time in the history of Selangor, would be aspirants were asked to apply to be councilors, stating their qualifications and reasons for wanting to be in local government. For Penang the NGO community, under the Penang Forum lobbied for their own NGO representatives which was originally supposed to be five, but was later whittled down to two representatives, a woman and a man. It is only in a few urban based councils in Selangor

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4   At the national level the percentage of women representatives in the Senate, Parliament and State Assemblies are 28.8 percent 10.4 percent and 8.0 percent respectively. Since 1957, the number of women cabinet ministers has never exceeded three, and with Najib installed as Prime Minister in April 2009, it is now back to two (7.1 percent) in the present cabinet line-up of 29 ministers. In terms of local councils, although numbers shift on an annual basis, data show that women comprise less than 20 percent of total councilors.

5   The data is for 2009. Most councilors are appointed for a term of one year after which they may or may not be re-appointed.

where NGOs are represented, while in Penang the two NGO councilors are on the island itself. Councilors are in charge of usually two or three committees at a time.

This study, conducted from May to August 2009, utilizes a qualitative approach, prioritizing the experiences and voices of our 'subjects' in the semi-structured interview process. As noted earlier, the *Pakatan* government states of Selangor and Penang were deliberately selected as these were the sites where civil society actors, including women activists, contested in the state (and parliamentary) elections or were appointed as local councilors. The latter came in either because they applied for the position or were recommended by civil society and/or political parties.

Altogether there were 19 respondents, seven of whom were ADUNs and 12 were councilors. Thirteen were from Selangor and six from Penang. Most of the ADUNs (all women) were first time contenders (except for one person) and were quite young; the youngest being 28 years old and the oldest in her late 40s; while most of the councilors came from a human rights or women's rights background. The youngest was in her early 30s and the oldest in their mid to late 50s.

In Selangor, the respondents comprised six women ADUNs and seven councilors (six women and one man) from different locations – from urban to rural-based constituencies. Out of the six respondents (five women and one man) in Penang, one is an ADUN (the only woman in the government), one a Member of Parliament who is advisor to the woman Exco in the state and two are councilors – a man and a woman. Two other respondents are with a women's group due to their direct connection with the state council in charge of women's development. Semi-structured questions were drawn up for the different types of interviewees due to their varied locations in the political state structure.

Table 1: Women's Representation in Selangor and Penang State Government

State	MPs (all)	MPs (women)	State Assembly (All)	State Assembly (women)	Councillors (All)	Local Councilors (women)
Selangor	22	4 (18.1%)	56	8 (14.2%)	288 +	(10%)
Penang	13	1 (7.7%)	40	3 (7.5%)	48	8 (16.6%)

Table 2: Respondents Interviewed

	ADUNs	Councillors	MP	Women NGO	ALL
Selangor	6	7			13
Penang	1	2	1	2	6
ALL	7	9	1	2	19

THEIR DREAMS

The first set of questions delved into the respondents' reasons for participating in the recent elections, whether standing as a candidate at the state level or after the elections, in applying and accepting the position of councilor. The next sections examine the experiences of the new policy advocates, particularly in relation to gender and democracy at the state and local levels.

The ADUNs

While all the state level candidates who stood were enthusiastic and idealistic in wanting to see a change in the form and structure of politics, what was interesting was that none of them expected to win! Their responses ranged from 'I did not expect to be in government', 'winning was out of the question', 'we never minded losing as this is to gain experience', 'I said goodbye at my last rally as I did not even think I would win', 'it was mission impossible!', 'as a young girl I did not think I could win … it was a tough fight for me here'. Yet win they did, with rather huge majorities. The next step was to put their dreams into practice. What were these dreams? They were similar and varied as well.

Two of them mentioned that being in an NGO (non-governmental organization) was frustrating as they could not see real changes happening. They wanted to change women's position in society, to give a voice to women as men are not sensitive to gender issues. The younger respondents (in terms of age) felt that as part of the younger generation, they needed to contribute to change, including that of breaking through ethnic politics and the importance of 'doing something for our country'. A few wanted to practice *Pakatan* 'new politics' – one which would showcase genuine multi-ethnic cooperation and empower the community, especially women, bringing a new culture into politics.

Another, a Christian in an urban constituency, mentioned that her objective was to 'bring righteousness into government as there is a need for transparency and integrity'. She believed that it was possible to be involved in politics and still remain clean. But campaign time was not easy for this person as all she had on nomination day was RM700 which was sufficient for four flags, 3,000 plastic streamers and a few badges! In fact, she was very depressed and stayed in the shower for the longest time. And when she won, she felt numb and upset as she knew her life would never be the same again.

However, at the end of the day all of them stood as candidates because they wanted to have a say in policy and make sure that 'things went the right way'.

The Councillors

Coming from civil society backgrounds, some of the respondents applied for the councilor position as they wanted to see whether it was possible to change things from within. They were also looking for an opportunity to work with a new state government which had vouched to champion the core issues of the day. In this sense, as one councilor revealed, she wanted to be part of the machinery to ensure that the new government would walk the talk. Another wanted to 'know what it is about', be the link and strengthen the local level to be more efficient in responding to the people on the ground. Two others came in as they wanted to bring back local council elections, while three councilors felt that as citizens, they wanted

to contribute in their areas of expertise – in the rights of the disabled, gender and the environment.

Basically, their concerns were similar to those of the ADUNss – that the new state governments had restored their hopes in a transparent and non-corrupt administration. All were ecstatic and excited with the results of the elections as 'we can now do everything!'

But what are or have been the realities? What have been the opportunities to put all these dreams into place? What have been the barriers and tensions on the ground? The next two sections will discuss these issues and will use Sweetman's framework (1997) in terms of the substantive, structural and cultural elements in relation to the opportunities and impediments in struggling for democracy, women's rights and gender equality.

POLICY CHANGES

Since coming into power, democratic governance has been a key theme for both the states of Penang and Selangor. This can be seen in the various policies promulgated in relation to democracy and gender.

Penang's clarion call is Competency, Accountability and Transparency (CAT) and Lim Guan Eng, the Chief Minister, sees the state as a model of DAP governance, if not Malaysia's first CAT government (*The Star*, 10 March 2009). One of the key issues is the restoration of local council elections that the *Pakatan* coalition promised to fulfill when they came into power. A motion to that effect was tabled at the Penang Assembly in August when the Local Government Committee chairman called for the requisite amendments of the Local Government Act to allow for local government elections (*New Straits Times*, 12 August 2009). Another measure includes an open tender system for projects exceeding RM50,000 and a balloting system for those between RM20,000 and RM50,000. In addition, all DAP Members of Parliament and state assembly are not allowed to apply for the purchase of state land in Penang (*The Rocket*, Issue 4:2009).

In terms of practicing accountability and transparency in governance, Selangor has (1) set up a state Select Committee on Competency, Accountability and Transparency (Selcat); (2) disclosed the assets of its Ex-Co members; and (3) started an internal audit of the spending of state allocations by state assembly members. In addition, the state government intends to pass the Freedom of Information Act as well as the Selangor Legislative Assembly Service Commission Enactment (Selesa). The latter moves to separate the powers of the state executive and the legislature (*Malaysian Insider*, 12 August 2009).

Engendering the State

For the first time, in 2009, International Women's Day was celebrated in style by the Selangor and Penang state governments. The Selangor Government, led by Rodziah Ismail, the state Exco for women, and five other women leaders, launched an awareness and education campaign for the hospital-based One Stop Crisis Centre (OSCC) which offers support to victims of violent and sexual crimes. At the same time, the Chief Minister announced female civil servants are now entitled to 90 days maternity leave, while husbands would receive 14 days paternity leave. Female staff whose husbands passed away would obtain 30 days leave compared to three days emergency leave before this (*The Star*, 9 March

2009). Youth leadership at the state level would have a minimum of 30 per cent women leaders, a quota put in place by one of the respondents. Trainings pertaining to violence against women, good governance and women's rights are being conducted with the support of women's NGOs. Besides, there is a move to set up women's community centres in various state constituencies.

The Penang Government, together with 23 NGOs organized the first state-level Women's Day Carnival over the weekend of 7-8 March 2009. As noted by Ong Kok Fooi, the state Exco for Women, "This is recognition by the state of the importance of women in our society. I hope this programme will be a stepping stone towards empowering women in Penang in all areas of life" (*The Rocket*, Issue 4: 2009). Ong is being advised by a women's council comprising a diverse mix of women's NGOs in the state. A women's centre as well as a child care centre have been set up and various trainings on gender equality have been conducted by women's NGOs in collaboration with the state. In fact, this is the first time that women's NGOs are a part of the decision-making process at the state level. They are also helping implement programmes for women, an opportunity they did not have in the previous administration.

While both Selangor and Penang have an Exco in charge of women, community and family development, there is as yet no clear gender policy for the state in writing. But plans seem to be in the making as the beginning of 2010 showed. In January 2010, the Selanogr state sponsored a women's leadership convention which drew some 2000 women from community and grassroots organizations. There was also a soft launch of the Selangor Women's Welfare Agenda – an action plan for women's development and empowerment (De Vries, forthcoming). Penang will be embarking on a similar programme during a month long celebration of International Women's Day in the state.

At the party level, both the PKR and DAP have their women's wings which have been advocating for the mainstreaming of gender within their respective parties. As mentioned earlier, PKR women's wing managed to pass an amendment to the party constitution for at least 30 per cent of women to be in decision-making positions in the party. This was followed by the PKR Chief Minister of Selangor announcing in November 2009 of a target of at least 30 percent women in decision-making in the state administration. The DAP's 2008 election manifesto included demands for providing childcare facilities for working parents, enacting flexi-hour working programmes for employees and providing rights and gender sensitization education to eliminate discrimination. Since then the DAP Chief Minister of Penang has made various pronouncements on gender equality, the latest being the appointment of the first woman to helm a local authority in the country (21 February, 2010 Sunday Star).

While these are laudable policies at the state/macro level, what are the realities at the ground level? Put another way, what have been the experiences of the state assembly persons and councilors in terms of the democratization of structures and the realization of gender equality?

"THE GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE IS HOPELESS"

As mentioned above, institutions do not operate in their idealized bureaucratic forms. They apparently have a distinct, if not independent culture of their own, honed though years of existence. Executive decisions are made easy in some circumstances while mystifying work in others, although on the whole 'executive authority dissipates as it passes downward

through the hierarchy' (Staudt, 1998: 62). Policy changes tend to evaporate at the structural level (Sweetman, 1997). Nonetheless because cultures do change in response to crisis and to new executives, it is important for new policy advocates to diagnose these institutional cultures if they want to bring about change, as we shall see as well, in the Malaysian context of 'new politics'.

This untenable situation was clearly borne out by the frustrating experiences of the ADUNs and councilors as interviews with them revealed their struggles and tensions with the bureaucracy when they first came into office. It was not a smooth sail for them after more than 50 years of *Barisan* rule as the civil service is populated with BN loyalists who seem to have benefited from the system as noted by the respondents. Here are some of their thoughts:

- The government structure is hopeless: very bureaucratic. Regarding enforcement, it is double standard and racist.
- We are dealing with the structures and mindsets of 50 years. It is not easy to dig out (*korek*) things which are not right.
- This is a steep learning curve for me, a struggle to adjust macro and micro level issues. It is a system designed to make you fail! You cannot monitor implementation, it's inefficient. There are structural barriers. Civil service is also a barrier. They work in a compartmentalized way, they are slow and there is deliberate sabotage. After all, you are taking their side income away.
- Civil servants never say no, but resort to deliberate delays.

A strident critique came from a Penang councilor:

> We are stymied because of the rules and regulations. Our hands are so tied up. The state has very little control, especially in Penang. To our disgust, we discovered how centralised the federal system is. This is a continuation of a federal, hierarchal and patriarchal structure. There are more than 40 Federal projects which are not submitted to the local council for approval. Although the real procedure is that you have to get the approval of the local council. The Byzantive system of laws and guide lines is a barrier.

The lack of structural support and resources is also experienced in the implementation of the various women's programmes, both by Ex-cos and by women's groups engaging with the state directly as evidenced below.

In the previous government, the Department of Women, Family and Community Department at the state level provided the financial and logistical support to the woman Exco in charge of women. But with the change in government, all these resources have been taken away in both Selangor and Penang. Likewise, an ADUN in Selangor could not implement her human development programmes in schools as she was not allowed to 'enter' the schools. As such she had to have these educational programmes outside the school compound. According to the women's Exco in Penang:

> During the first week, the Women's Department came to see me. But in the second week, they said they could not help me. It was a directive from the Federal – they could not help the state. They told me clearly, that all federal agencies do not work with the state.

Another example was when one women's NGO in Penang was asked to set up a women's centre by the state government. What was positive was that the group has autonomy in setting up the centre but as the executive director lamented 'one of the stumbling blocks is the bureaucracy'. While the budget has been approved to start this centre, the cash came in five months later. Staff contracts had to be signed by the state which was slow in issuing them. For example a contract for a social worker took four months to clear. The process of contracting out building works was also another headache for her. As the new centre had to be renovated:

> It has to go through a state registered contractor. They quoted 30 per cent more, and did a shoddy job on top of it. Our quotation was RM12,000, while the contractor quoted RM17,000. Another quoted RM19,000. In the end a woman contractor got it, but was full of nonsense. She gave lousy things.

BEYOND PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY

The culture of masculinity as indicated below is not the only barrier faced by both women ADUNs and councilors alike. 'Ageism' towards the young and ethnicity permeate and interplay with sexist attitudes at the ground level.[6] This is felt by several younger ADUNs and activist councilors. According to an assembly woman:

> It is a fact that people look down on a woman everywhere she goes. For example, at a government event, a woman will be asked, 'Eh! *Ah Moi, apa you buat sini*?' ['Eh, you (Chinese girl) what are you doing here?] Even though they know that you are an elected representative. As such I have to be very fierce.

Even experienced human rights women activists felt that they were put in their place when they first came in.

A councilor from the Indian community said:

> I didn't see myself as a woman. I came as a human rights activist to help the *Pakatan Rakyat* achieve some kind of change. But when I got in, I realized that it is a man's world. Politics is really male-dominated. There are mainly men in Residents Council at the Zone level.

> The setback is I am a woman and I look young and small, which is a further setback. Secondly, I am from a minority community. It is easier to be accepted if I wear *tudung* and *baju kurung*, you look more mainstream and acceptable. It makes it easier for the Mayor to talk to me. Culturally we are worlds apart. It is easy for Malay men to be close to the Mayor. In the Residents Associations, only men come for meetings.

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[6]   While the religious divide, much of which is politically motivated, is often quoted as tearing apart the nation, it is interesting to note that most of our respondents did not see religious differences as an issue. Ethnicity was a more important marker as they attempted to cross, if not transcend ethnic boundaries.

Another Indian women's rights activist, also a councilor, faced similar problems when trying to transcend the gender and ethnic divide. Even her struggle for disabled peoples' rights got waylaid. She had this to say:

> My main interest is to help women. But I do not know how to change attitudes. I do not see myself as an Indian. I wore *baju kurung* during the swearing. I was harassed by men all the time. Until I got fed up at one function, and wore a *sari* for the first and last time.
>
> I am trying to work with women from different ethnic groups. But it is difficult, especially with Malay women who want an Islamic perspective. There are no women leaders in DAP. The Indian men from DAP do not want me to be a councilor: I have no problems going out at night. I am not married. As a woman, I am not taken seriously. The aunties in my area kept saying, 'You have to be careful. You are a girl'. My family thinks I am bonkers for leaving my job at the college. I have been told that I am anti-men. The District Council thinks that it is strange to fight for women. I even had to fight for disabled car parks. I had to fight for two months to get two spaces for the disabled.

Being a Malay woman was not a privilege either where women's issues are concerned. A women's rights activist, a Malay, with years of experience also found that she was side-stepped. She stated that 'sadly, bringing about change in mindset remains a tough challenge'- this was when she tried to raise awareness among her council members on the need to do away with gender discrimination. She added that the choice of representatives at decision making levels are usually party-based and not based on gender, capability, experience and background of an individual. Thus this lopsided process has deprived women of a chance to be involved in the decision-making.

Another woman councilor pointed out that all the main departments in her local council are run by men pointing out that 'the men are prehistoric in the way they think'. She added that she was getting resistance regarding women's representation as 'they think it's funny that there is a women's agenda'. And even though there are four other women councilors they keep silent most of the time. Nonetheless, she was now beginning to do activities for women. She has organized a training for women staff although it was difficult to get the funds approved as 'they think that women are always sending kids to school, sick, taking leave'.

A key women's leader observed that the men in the party were a serious barrier. This was because the 'stakes are high now that we are in power. Especially when you are in power the competition gets higher. And the greater the competition, the more women are disadvantaged.'

SOME POSITIVE OUTCOMES, NONETHELESS:
"THE POWER IS IN THE NEGOTIATION"

Despite the above structural and cultural barriers and threats, several positive steps have been taken to expand the democratic space and push for women's concerns, if not gender equality at the state and local levels. Various programmes have been implemented and there are positive attempts by the state governments to work with women's NGOs. As a women's NGO activist opined, although somewhat ambivalently:

> There is the willingness of the state to concede that women's issues are important. But women's concerns are again separate from other aspects. Why can't gender be put into everything they do? There is acknowledgement but not real inclusion. It is not holistic. It is also not entirely true that the leadership is sensitive to gender equality. This is only because if they don't do it then they will get whacked. But at least we have managed to change the gender discourse.

Besides pushing for democratic reform, women ADUNs and councilors are engaging well with the community, organizing various economic activities and gender training programmes. They mentioned their objectives of empowering women and transcending ethnic boundaries through these programmes which are attended by women of all ethnic communities. A few of the councilors feel that they are vocal about politics as well as about women's issues, stating, 'We do not have any problems regarding women's voice. The women at our council are vocal. Gender is not an issue for me.'

However, it was felt that 'we women need to sit together and share our burdens as women. We are expected to do extra for women, on top of our mainstream work. There are expectations placed on us as women. If you don't run women's programmes, who is going to do it? Women who have problems only go to the women ADUN. Indeed the high and age-old expectations of their constituencies, like paying bills, helping out mortgage payments, giving contracts, remain a constant battle the new ADUNs have to struggle with in their efforts to disengage from the dependency and subsidy syndrome of the old regime.

There has also been some success in getting old procedures and processes re-vamped and new ones put in, especially at the local council level. For instance, the councilors have managed to insist on meeting minutes being sent out 72 hours before the council meeting proper, so that they could study them properly. They have initiated processes for consultation with the public. They have opened up the tender system so that new contractors could come in.

With time and more experience, the councilors are learning how to change mind sets and institutional processes. According to one councilor, 'It is only after nine months that we understand better. Policy-wise, there is about 60 per cent change. For example, having more open tender, having more control regarding how the tender is approved.' Another mentioned that he has managed to set up sub-committees to review decisions – a check and balance mechanism. He had also succeeded in having an Audit Committee in his council, a structure now adopted in all the councils in the two states. It took a long struggle but as he said, 'The power is in negotiation.' ADUNs, despite being elected representatives have to fight too as revealed here:

When I became the ADUN, the state government and local councilors agreed
to take over the community centre that was previously used by *Bariosan*
Nasional especially UMNO. However, the local government officers were too
afraid to act because the UMNO members give them pressure. Anyway, I
brought the enforcement from the local government and broke the lock as I
wanted to show them how to do it. They felt shocked as I am a woman and I
have the courage to do so but they (the men) can't. Now that they know my
attitude, even though I'm young and a woman, they know that they can't bully
me. It took me three months to overcome that.

CONCLUSION: GENDER AND DEMOCRACY: A NEW SYNERGY?

Democratic and transparent government has enabled more women to be involved in politics
and government (Goetz, 2009). But the increase of women in public office has also been the
result of the struggles of the global and national women's movement in their demand for
inclusive citizenship as a just and democratic right for historically marginalized groups. Of
course, the rhetoric of descriptive representation has to be transformed into that of substantive
representation whereby women's interests and perspectives are well articulated by these new
women political representatives. And in many cases, as in the Scandinavian countries, it has
been shown that the high number of women in public office has led to increased gains for
women in, for example, the areas of employment and access to social services and benefits.
(Shireen, 2009).

To be sure, women need democracy to gain access to public office, but does democracy
flourish with a more gender-equitable representation? It has been argued that there is a strong
correlation between low levels of corruption and the increase of women in government,
although a UNIFEM report reveals that both women in government and low levels of
corruption are linked with the practice of liberal democracy (Goetz, 2009). This situation
seems to be loosely corroborated by a front page article in a Malaysian English daily
headlined "Women less corrupt" providing data that of the 2,500 persons nabbed by the
Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission in the last four years, 94 per cent are men (*New
Sunday Times*, 16 August 2009). Women advocates point to growing evidence that higher
numbers of women in governing positions are more attentive to increasing transparency in
government and business as well as better social and legal protection to communities (Lynn,
2009). Democratic change will most certainly be enhanced by having more women in
strategic positions!

It has also been argued that since the state is constantly changing it allows for gender
dynamics to intervene in its development trajectory. In his paper Connell (1994: 159-60)
further argues that 'crisis tendencies develop in the gender order which allow new political
possibilities'. This analysis seems to have been given credence as in the recent decade, the
rise of women leaders in the Asian region has been during periods of flux and upheavals
(Fleschenberg, 2008; Maznah, 2002), including during the process of democratic change.

This article indicates that the new women (and men) policy advocates are indeed trying to
breathe new life into the process of democratic transition in the states of Selangor and Penang.
They are supported by the leadership at the macro level with the launch of more transparent
policies which are supposed to permeate down to the constituency and local levels. It seems
that the male leadership is also pressured to engage in a more equitable gender discourses as

evidenced by the various gender friendly policy pronouncements. There has also been positive engagement, if not collaboration, with women's NGOs in the formulation and implementation of programmes towards women's rights and empowerment. Nonetheless, a clearer understanding of gender and women's rights needs to emerge as should a policy and clear action plan to guide gender concerns in the two states.

However, at another level, the article argues that there have also been high (and unrealistic) expectations of women's political representation. Women representatives are expected to take care of the needs of their constituency AS WELL as women's needs. This appears to be the excuse that male representatives need not pay attention to women's issues given that their female colleagues will 'naturally' do so. Such gender stereotypes from society have to be re-constructed, so that politics has to cover both the public and private areas which are not separate domains, but a continuum. Politics and political institutions today are unfortunately still embedded within a gender regime characterized by a culture of masculinity which throws drawbacks to new and especially young women politicians. But the setback is not just due to patriarchal ideology and practices. Women ADUNs and councilors also face discrimination due to their age and ethnic identity, in addition to intra-party competition now that power is being tasted.

In addition, the two case studies reinforce the prediction of institutional theory - that institutions are able to resist change (Lovenduski, 2005). And in periods of democratic change, the constraints of such political situations affect the capacities of new political advocates. Most of these studies focus at the national level. However this article is focused on two (opposition) states engaging and negotiating within the national political regime. What is significant here in the Malaysian situation is the over centralized federal system and a *Barisan* government which is prepared to bend rules in its favour – adversely affecting the reform mechanisms and processes, actual or proposed at the state or meso level. Attempts at more transparency and accountability at the structural level have also sometimes met hot stone walls – a 'monster' to quote a chief minister – whereby these reform processes are sometimes sabotaged or are just delayed due to an inefficient bureaucracy cemented by decades of the *anciene* regime. Thus it has been an ambivalent situation with the struggle producing both successes as well as frustrations.

To quote Rai (2008:69): 'Political practice has clarified that democratization is not a wave that comes and goes – it is an unfolding and untidy process.' The future of Malaysian politics will see a pretty messy process unfolding as the stakes are high for both coalitions in their struggle for political power.

At the ground level, the dreams of these new women political representatives and advocates will take time to be realized. A councilor voiced out, 'The process is very slow but I do not mind carrying on.' This was reinforced by a young ADUN who quipped, 'It has been tough but challenging. I have overcome the worst. I will stand again. Next time, I will move to contest as a Member of Parliament.'

Is there hope in and for this new dawn?

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