

The future is female

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Senator Engku Naimah Engku Taib being sworn in to the Senate in Parliament House

THE announcement by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak that women would make up at least 30% of Senators should Barisan Nasional (BN) retain a majority in the next general election is a talking point for many.

I am impressed. But, why do we need to wait till another BN landslide victory for the PM to reform the Senate? Does that mean that women are not worthy of the recognition and should not be given the opportunity otherwise?

It is a radical and bold announcement and in sync with what is required for a country like Malaysia to embrace the 4th Industrial Revolution.

Cognitive psychology research has shown that men and women have different decision-making strategies and they differ in self-awareness when they are under stress.

In this respect, it is really important to include women as part of the decision-making process because women are evidently better at flagging and recognising risks. The unknown and unexpected risks coming from all fronts in today's world have made it essential to have diversity in leadership and in the decision-making process.

Today, the gender gap exists across many domains. Men are more economically, politically and socially empowered than women.

Interestingly, women made up more than 60% of graduates leaving universities annually in many countries. However the pay-gap in gender is prevalent everywhere.

In Malaysia, women get paid 79 cents compared to RM1 earned by men for doing the same job. And I guess this may be one of the many reasons as to why only approximately 50% of women in Malaysia are in the workforce today.

Malaysia is never a proud nation when it comes to female representation in the National Parliament. We ranked 156/199 according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Currently only 10.8% of parliamentarians are women.

Are we saying that we don't have enough capable women to be legislators or Malaysian women are not good enough to be leaders? Why is this problem so prevalent when the women's wing is always the one being mobilised to do the hard work on the ground?

We have only three woman ministers in the Federal Cabinet!

If we look at female representation within the internal party leadership structure of individual parties; Pakatan Rakyat by far has the highest representation of 26.7%, while Gerakan scored the worst for having only 5% of women in the Central Committee.

Established parties who are seeing reduced traction from voters will see a further reduction in support if they do not change. Heritage parties may hold on to their older support base but will struggle to revive their brands and positioning in ways that are authentic to women and millennials.

Women and millennials are loyal to values, not brands, logos and slogan chanting.

Hence, the announcement by the PM earlier this week hopefully will be a motivating factor for more women to come forward to play an active role in nation-building. It will be even more meaningful if the PM would consider appointing qualified and passionate women outside of the political system to the Senate.

Come to think of it, women control on average 85% of the consumer spending worldwide yet only play a minute role in leadership space.

If this does not change, we will witness a larger fundamental disconnect at the leadership level that will trickle down to businesses and the society at large. Most of the time, women are less willing to engage with messaging that is not authentically crafted with female-driven insights.

Political parties and governments, just like any business organisations that haven't invested in promoting feminism or inclusion within the teams, will eventually lose the battle to those that build their organisations from the ground up with "diversity" and "inclusion" baked into their DNA.

For the longest time many called the Senate the rubber stamp and Senators don't play much of a role in the public policy-making process. The call to reform the Senate has been going on for the longest time in the Malaysian space.

The announcement to appoint women to make up to 30% of Senators is one step towards reform and improving the gender balance in the August Houses of Parliament.

Do we now expect to see more seats being created at the Senate for women or some men removed to make space for the women? What would be the criteria for someone to be appointed?

I really would like to see some younger female representation in the Senate, and I hope that those appointments will go to those who qualify, to ensure that such opportunity achieves its fullest potential.

I have always believed that a quota is a quota. It is a crutch to help us stand because we are too weak to have our voices heard and we are too weak to be meaningfully represented. Hence, I tend to be sceptical on this 30% quota system for women.

That was until recently at a Women's Roundtable in Hong Kong, an experienced and senior female counterpart shared her views and corrected my perception.

And to quote her, she said: 'who cares whether the men label an allocation quota or whatever. We grab all opportunities we can as long as there are opportunities. We don't have to pick how those opportunities come to us. We as women need to learn how to be more confident and fight for opportunities.'

Every country is an expression of what we, the people believe in and what we value. My hope moving forward is to not having to hear the joke that "the shortest line in parliament is at the ladies" anymore.

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