

Malaysia: women seizing the political agenda

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Women are claiming a leading role the political reform movement in Malaysia. In July this year, around 50,000 Malaysians braved a massive state-sponsored onslaught against freedom of expression and freedom of assembly to gather in the nation's capital to demand electoral reform. It was the second time that Malaysians gathered in a mass rally to demand these reforms, but the first time that the call was led by a woman, Ambiga Sreenevasan, and where the lead organisation was a women's rights NGO, Empower. This put gender directly in the spotlight of the Bersih movement. Bersih means 'Clean' in Malay, and was the name given to the movement for electoral reform.

The most obvious positive aspect was that women were at the heart of the movement, its demands and its public face. This in turn gave added publicity - though shallow in coverage - to the gendered nature of the current electoral system and its flaws. Negative, however, was the gendered attacks on the Bersih leadership, particularly Ambiga, with one blogger going as far as to call for her to be gang-raped.

Bersih and Bersih 2.0

The July rally was the second Bersih rally. The first, held in November 2007, was led by political parties that are not part of the ruling coalition. It was dominated by the male leadership of these parties, although women took part in the protest and were among those arrested as supporters of the rally and its aims.

Bersih 2.0 differs from the earlier incarnation in that it is headed not by political parties, but by civil society. The aim has been to create a platform open to all, regardless of political affiliation and it has eight demands, including fair access to the media, cleaning up the electoral roll and the use of indelible ink to prevent corruption. None of the demands is obviously linked to gender, yet the movement is housed in a women's NGO, with women forming the bulk of the secretariat. In its own statements and representation, the movement is primarily female, as also symbolized by the 'Bersih Aunty', an older woman who faced down tear gas and water cannons armed with a few flowers.

But this primacy of women has been difficult for the ruling coalition to accept. They have either used gender-specific attacks against the women leading the movement, or attempted to portray the movement as being led by men (the leaders of the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition). Yet, Malaysian women have been at the forefront of political struggles since the struggle for independence, in both the official and alternative narratives.

The Bersih 2.0 movement is different from earlier movements, in that it is headed by a woman. Moreover, it is headed by a woman who has been appointed its head on her own merits, not because she is the wife or daughter of a prominent other. In its first incarnation, Bersih was primarily male and primarily Muslim. Ambiga Sreenevasan is neither of these. More, she has been at the forefront of the fight for religious freedom in Malaysia, a position that is seen as attacking Islam by sectors of the media, including opposition media. On both these fronts she was open to vicious personal attack in which her sexuality and marital status came under scrutiny.

These tactics have not worked. A friend related how traders in his area warned him that their stalls

would be closed on the day of the July rally. They told that , stating that Ambiga was their hero. Both the tone and the statement are significant - Ambiga, in her 'defiance' of the authorities, in the face of death threats and continuous harassment, has helped Malaysian to overcome fear of surveillance, of censorship and of the State.

But it hasn't just been about one woman. I would be amiss to leave out the other leading female light in this campaign, Maria Chin Abdullah, who has been part of the women's movement in Malaysia for over 20 years. Like Ambiga, she faced harassment from the authorities, though the attacks were not as sustained and they were less focused on her sexuality and marital status.

Also, in the run-up to the rally, Zuraida Kamaruddin, the head of the Parti Keadilan Rakyat's women's wing, urged women to see Bersih as part of the struggle for gender equality. She spoke of the continuing marginalisation of women under the current government, and urged women to let their voices be heard. This was an important announcement on at least two fronts. I am unaware of any time in the past when a party political leader appealed to women to take political action as part of the struggle for equality.

There have been street protests on particular 'women's issues' (rape, domestic violence), there have been imaginative campaigns by women's rights activists on political issues, but this is the first time there has been a rallying cry of equality to draw women to march on a political issue on something not considered a 'women's issue'. For the first time, electoral reform is being framed as a women's issue. Analysis of this was practically non-existent in the mass media, but the call from a major political party is a huge leap forward. Women may not be defining the political agenda, but they are visibly claiming it for their own.

On the down-side, this led to more gendered attacks by the State. The first line of attack was to attempt to marginalise the women in leadership positions, deny them a voice, deny their legitimacy. The government-owned media (practically all Malaysia's traditional media!) continuously portrayed the march as an 'Opposition rally', as being led by Anwar Ibrahim, and as being violent. The second line has been well-documented by feminist Janatharni Arumugam⁷, under the apt title 'Stop bullying the Bersih women! '.

I would tentatively suggest, however, that the outlook is positive. The State is on the defensive, and women are at the forefront of these changes in society. And not just women, but feminists are at the forefront.

By Sonia Randhawa,

Director, Centre for Independent Journalism, Malaysia

P.S.

* From SIAWI:

<http://www.siawi.org/article2553.html>

* Source: WE!, an Isis International e-newsletter, offers news, information and commentary on women's activism and rights around the globe.