Faculty of Social Science

Political Participation and Gender: Political Marginalization of Women in Sarawak Politics

Nadrawina Isnin

Doctor of Philosophy
(Political Science)
2015
DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL WORK

I declare that the work in this thesis has been carried out in accordance with the regulations stipulated by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). This is the original work and is the result of my study, unless otherwise stated or recognized as referenced work. The writing of this thesis has never been documented in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) or submitted or any academic or non-academic institutions for any other Phd or qualification.

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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND GENDER: POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION OF WOMEN IN SARAWAK POLITICS

By

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A graduate research paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy (Political Science)

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DEDICATION

To my parents: Haji Isnin bin Salleh, Hajjah Jamilah bt Haji Maleng
Husband: Norazman Abdul Rahim
Children: Nurnadhirah, Nor Aiman, Nurnadhilah

For their love, patience, sacrifice and understanding whilst paddling the ocean of struggle.

“No two things have been combined better than knowledge and patience”.

-Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)-
ABSTRACT

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND GENDER: POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION OF WOMEN IN SARAWAK POLITICS

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This thesis is concerned with women’s political underrepresentation in Sarawak. This study aims to explore the reasons for women lacking at the decision making level of Sarawak’s political system. It also targets to examine the linkages between power structures and women roles in Sarawak’s political process; and to identify the ideological principles that encourages or discourages women from being involved. A mixed method is employed which is the prominence method for this research. Empirical evidence is conducted in Sarawak largely confirms the pervasiveness within society and within political parties which is male-dominated. The first major observation of this research maintains that the problem is due to the absence of political women attributed to various factors given that a patriarchal societal structure within the societies. Women in Sarawak were at the forefront for struggle of the sovereignty prior to independence in 1957. However, independence and statehood did not grant these female pugilists the same political status as their male counterparts. Second it was found that people have generally moved away from the negative stereotypes of women, but there is still a strong belief in male superior status. While the men assumed leadership roles, the women were systematically forced to remain in the grassroots or raised to the glorified status of the Women’s Wing of political parties. Even in this Wing, their political fate is sealed because aspirations to rise to higher levels are either sluggish or based on political connections which many are lacking. A third observation confirms that regardless of diversified cultures (Malay/Melanau, Iban and Chinese communities), divulged similar attitudes in relation to women in politics. Through interviews, all findings collected over a period of six months study suggests that, the women’s choices and loyalty does not guarantee a representation in the government or the decision-making level. The results indicate that patriarchal society and political patronage plays a vital role to realize political gains for the women if they wished to be in the upper level of the political echelon.

Keywords: political underrepresentation, patriarchal societal structure, women in politics
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Nadrawina Isnin
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<tr>
<td>AWAS</td>
<td><em>Angkatan Wanita Sedar</em> (a Women’s Movement)</td>
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<td>BARJASA</td>
<td><em>Barisan Rakyat Jati Sarawak</em></td>
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<td>BN</td>
<td><em>Barisan Nasional</em> (National Front)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DAP</td>
<td>Democratic Action Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>MCA</td>
<td>Malayan Chinese Association</td>
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<td>MIC</td>
<td>Malayan Indian Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>MWFCD</td>
<td>Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCWO</td>
<td>National Council For Women’s Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANAS</td>
<td><em>Parti Negara Sarawak</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>PBB</td>
<td><em>Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBDS</td>
<td><em>Parti Banca Dayak Sarawak</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUPP</td>
<td>Sarawak United People’s Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRS</td>
<td><em>Parti Rakyat Sarawak</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPDP</td>
<td>Sarawak People’s Democratic Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Economic and Social Council</td>
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Political participation, is not a homogeneous process that is simply defined by a specific action. Rather, it connotes various processes of political actions and activities. Political participation goes beyond the act of voting or being voted for. Accordingly, it is this understanding that will be explored in the chapters of this thesis. The concepts or notions of political participation and gender are always at variance or at least evoked to a high degree in various discourses. Indeed, I agree with Pizzorno’s (1970) argument that the bulk of research on political participation has, in fact, up to now, mainly been carried out by American researchers, given the characteristics of American political life that are related to electoral procedure.

Consequently, patriarchy, a dominant feature of human civilization, has ensured that power, an outstanding element of politics, is controlled or allocated by that part of the human species known as man. Indeed, the journey for the female human being to partake in any form of political activity has been intertwined with struggle, protest, active negation and sometimes the shedding of sweat and blood. Examples of these struggles and the shedding of blood are not unique to Asia and or to gender politics. One of the contemporary icons of this differing relationship is Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma (Myanmar), who has continued to pursue equal and just political participation for all Burmese. Undeniably, politics in many (if not in all) Asian countries is first
and foremost based on gender categorization. In Sarawak and other Malaysian states, politics is often viewed as a masculine profession; hence, female participants are often seen as decorative symbols – to be seen but not heard. Ironically, the journey to statehood both at the national and the state level has in many instances been championed by women. Paradoxically, when statehood was achieved, female participants were shoved into the corners or simply entrusted with posts or positions that related to family and child which fall within the women’s domain.

By the same token, Sarawak, and Malaysia in general, is no exception when it comes to the issue of gender and political participation. Like their menfolk, in Malaysia (and in Sarawak in particular) women were at the forefront for struggle of the sovereignty prior to independence in 1957. However, independence and statehood did not grant these female pugilists the same political status as their male counterparts. While the men assumed leadership roles, the women were systematically forced to remain in the grassroots or were raised to the glorified status of the Women’s Wing of political parties. Even in this glorified Wing, their political fate is sealed because aspirations to rise to higher levels are either sluggish or based on political connections which many are lacking.

For this reason, this study therefore examines the concrete problems or hindrances that inhibit most Sarawak women from rising from mere party members to more important political positions in their various parties. In essence, this study explores factors that prevent gender-equal political participation at every level of politicking in Sarawak. To clearly understand the core of this
thesis, political participation is best illustrated as a political pyramid (see figure 1 on page 3). At the bottom, there is an army of women working endlessly to ensure their political parties win maximum votes to stay in power. These female political participants are often described as women at the ‘grass roots’. The next level has only a few women, chosen by political godfathers to be presidents of women’s wings and sometimes office holders, but the majority are men. However, the uppermost level which one could call an “Exclusive Boys Club” is completely a male affair.

Figure 1: The Political Pyramid in Sarawak
This study therefore seeks to explore the fundamental rationale for women politicians being excluded from the apex of the political structure in Sarawak’s politics and political parties. The importance of this cannot be under or overestimated because women constitute more than 49.7 per cent of Sarawak population of registered voters. In fact, based on the statistics from the Election Commission, as of the fourth quarter of 2010, in the electoral rolls there were 490,526 or 50.06 per cent women voters, while the men made up 489,270 or 49.94 per cent (Chan, 2011). Moreover, the percentage of women voters outnumbers the percentage of men voters in 40 out of the 71 seats in the state’s constituencies. Indeed, in some areas, the women have been more effective than men in wooing voters (Chan, 2011). As mentioned above, women make up 60 to 70 percent of the grass roots and are a formidable part of political parties and voters. In addition, there are more female students in universities in Sarawak and therefore more female graduates, and last but not least, women are the cornerstone of Sarawak families and are in a better position to recognize policies that will reshape and benefit families.

Therefore, one of the justifications for this empirical study is that Malaysian women, in contrast to many women in developed and developing nations, have made very little significant progress with regards to their political participation. This is even visible when one looks at the increase in the number of women in political leadership positions\(^1\) in many parts of the world from the 1980s up to 2009 (Women in Politics, 2009). What is more, data from the Malaysian Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCFD) (2007) shows that the highest level of

\(^1\) For instance, women who have led their countries include, from the Philippines, Corazon Aquino as President; from India, Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil as President; from Bangladesh, Sheik Hasina Wajed as Prime Minister; from Australia, Quentin Bryce as Governor-General; from Mozambique, Luisa Diogo as Prime Minister; and from Germany, Angela Merkel as Chancellor.
leadership attained by women in Malaysia is the ministerial level. Even then, very few women have been appointed as ministers since independence in 1957. For instance, there are nine female ministers within 42 years that is, between the years from 1969 to 2011. The same source notes that no Malaysian woman has ever competed for or been appointed the Prime Minister of the nation or Chief Minister of a state, or president of the Parti Pakatan Rakyat (except for Parti Pakatan Rakyat, which was headed by Wan Azizah in March 2008 after winning the 12th General Election, but she gave up her seat to her husband in July 2008).

In many ways, the state of Sarawak has championed this gender division in political participation. For example, there have been three women ministers and two assistant ministers (at the state level) from 1970 to 2010. In December 2010 (up till 29 September 2011)\(^2\), a former assistant minister (a woman) was appointed as the minister responsible for three main portfolios and three sub-portfolios, but the portfolios and sub-portfolios are domestic in nature. That is, the Human Resource Development; Early Childhood and Early Child Care; and Women and Family Development; and the three sub-portfolios are Education; Cottage Industry (entrepreneurship); and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (dealing with Malay language and literature matters).

In view of the above facts, this study explores the dynamic that deters gender-equal political participation at every level of politicking in Sarawak. In fact, both the primary and secondary data employed in this study clearly indicate that political participation and placing in Sarawak

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\(^2\) As cited in The Borne Post online, 29 September 2011.
(and Malaysia) have precise gender differences. This is most obvious at the pinnacle of the political structure(s) of the core policy makers and political parties. This understanding will become much clearer later on in the thesis when I examine the notion of political participation. Therefore, the next paragraph will explain further the background of this study on the women’s political participation in Sarawak.

1.1 Background study

An essential principle laid down in the United Nations’ Human Rights Charter on International Standards clearly states that men and women have an equal right to participate fully in all aspects of the political process (United Nations, 2010:111 cited in United Nations, 1946). Indeed, the United Nations (2010:111) reaffirm that ensuring women’s freedom to participate in politics, both as voters and as representatives, is central to international, regional and national efforts aimed at more inclusive and democratic governance. Further, the United Nations emphasize that these freedoms and rights are not limited to politics, but extend to participation and leadership in public life, the private sector and civil society in general. Nevertheless, the United Nations’ 2010 publication, *The World’s Women 2010: Trends and Statistics*, presented that in practice, however, it is often harder for women to exercise these rights. More specifically, it shows that a lack of gender balance in decision-making positions in government persists around the world. That is, women continue to be under-represented in national parliaments, where, on average, only 17 per cent of seats are occupied by women; the proportion of women among ministers also averages 17 per cent; and the highest positions are even more elusive: only seven
of 150 elected heads of state in the world and only 11 of 192 heads of government are women (2010). Furthermore, the report also states that when the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted in 1995, women accounted for an average 10 per cent of members of the lower or single houses of national parliaments; and this figure had only increased to 17 per cent by April 2009 (United Nations, 2010:112).

Therefore, this is a clear indication that the progress towards achieving the 30 per cent target advocated by the United Nations remained slow and uneven throughout the world. This is even more absurd given that half of the electorates in most countries of the world are women. Ironically, the member states of the United Nations have continued to preach universal gender equality, but data and studies have continued to demonstrate that these member states have pragmatically chosen to maintain patriarchal dominance and gender inequality; hence, women are continually under-represented in parliament and especially in the executive body of government.

Democratically speaking, the 30 per cent target is still under-representation given that women constitute almost 50 per cent of the world’s population. Hitherto, achieving this target seems to be an overly demanding task. Although the number of women in the workforce has increased dramatically (for example, in Malaysia, women made up 3.79 million in the workforce in 2006\(^3\)), they remain under-represented in the political sphere. Even though it is obvious that when women are involved in politics they bring different perspectives and views, and create creditable

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\(^3\) Refer to the Female Labor Force, Malaysia 2006 in the *Statistics on Women, Family and Social Welfare 2007* published by the MWFC.
and transparent political agendas. This is apparent in the recent political scene in Germany, Australia, and even in Sierra Leone. Indeed, women’s numbers have continued to dwindle rather than increase. Most female politicians champion issues not only of value to women, but also to family and communities, earning them national status. As the backbone of the family, women are directly involved in societal formation and reformation, making it an apparent necessity for them to be part of the executive body of government. As members of the decision-making body of the state, women would be very pragmatic regarding policies that address family and community needs. Indeed, gender inequalities either in socio-economic or political spheres always deter holistic development.

Similarly, in Malaysia, there is a serious under-representation of women at the apex of the political sector, that is, in Parliament (Lower and Upper Houses) and the State Legislative Assemblies. This is illustrated by the statistics provided by the MWFCD (2006) that show there is low participation of women in politics. The first example is the low number of female members in Parliament (Lower and Upper House). That is, in the Lower House or Dewan Rakyat, in 2006, there were 21 women out of a total of 219 members, which is 9.6 per cent seats as compared to 90.4 per cent held by men (MWFCD, 2006:56). This is a drop of almost 1 per cent compared to the 2003 statistics, which records 10.4 per cent female representation (MWFCD, 2003:43). However, in the Upper House or Dewan Negara, women members number 18 out of a total of 62, that is, 29 per cent. This is a slight increase of 1.6 per cent from 2003 to 2006.
Secondly, in 2007, there were only 40 women members in the 13 State Legislative Assemblies in Malaysia. Men comprised 536 out of a total of 576 members. This means that women only held 6.9 per cent of seats compared to men, who held 93.1 per cent. Here, there has been less than a 1 per cent increase in female representation; from 36 in 2004 to 40 in 2007, that is, a mere 0.6 per cent increase from 6.3 per cent to 6.9 per cent (MWFCD, 2007:41).

Based on the statistics mentioned above, it can be seen that the under-representation of women in Malaysian politics has not dramatically improved since 2004. Salleh and Rozaini (2008:2) also noticed an unimpressive percentage of women’s involvement in the Malaysian Parliament in 2008. They found that 11 per cent of women were elected to the Lower House, comprising 11 members from the opposition party and 13 members from the ruling party out of a total of 222 members. While, in the Upper House, the number of female members appointed as senators was 15 (out of a total number of 57) which is 28.07 per cent. Therefore, based on Salleh and Rozaini’s analysis, there has actually been only a one (1) per cent increase in the number of women senators since 2007. Whilst Salleh and Rozaini are concern about the low representation of women in the Malaysian Parliament proclaimed a breach of democratic principles as 50 per cent of the country consisted of women, the United Nations (2010:4) is concern about the slow rate of improvement in women’s share of national parliamentary seats, averaging 18.6 percent as of October 2009.

According to the progress report by the United Nations, this represents an increase of seven percentage points since 1995. In the two decades between 1975 and 1995, women’s