

Women in Malaysia: Exploring the Democratic Space in Politics

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Abstract : The main purpose of the present paper is to investigate the development and progress achieved by women in the decision-making sphere and to access the level of their political-participation in Parliamentary Elections of Malaysia and their status in overall Malaysian political domain. The paper also focuses on the role and status of women in the major political parties of the state both the parties in power as well as the parties in opposition. The primary objective of the study is to focus on the major hindrances and social malpractices faced by women and also Muslim women's access to justice in Malaysia. It also demonstrates the linkages between national policy initiatives and the advancement of women in various areas, such as economics, health, employment, politics, power-sharing, social development and law and most importantly evaluating their status in the dominant religion of the nation. In Malaysia, women's political participation is being challenged from every nook and corner of the society. A high percentage of women are getting educated, forming a significant labor force in present day Malaysia, who can be employed in the manufacturing sector, retail trade, hotels and restaurant, agriculture etc. Women today consist of almost half of the population and exceed boys in the tertiary sector by a ratio of 80:20. Despite these achievements, however, women's labor force engagement remains confined to 'traditional women's occupations', such as those of primary school teachers, data entry clerks and organizing polls during elections and motivating other less enlightened women to cast their votes. In the political arena, the past few General Elections of Malaysia clearly exhibited a slight change in the number of women Members of Parliament from 10.6% (20 out of 193 Parliamentary seats in 1999) to 10.5% (23 out of 219 Parliamentary seats in 2004). Amidst the political posturing for the recent General Election in 2013 of Malaysia, women's political participation remains a prime concern in Malaysia. It is evident that while much of the attention of women revolves around charitable assistance, they are much less likely to be portrayed as active participants in electoral politics and governance. According to the electoral roll for the third quarter of 2012, 6,578,916 women are registered as voters. They represent 50.2% of the total number of the registered voters. However, this parity in terms of voter registration is not reflected in the number of elected representatives at the Parliamentary level. Only 10.4% of sitting Members of Parliament are women. The women's participation in the legislature and executive branches are important since their presence brings the spotlight squarely on issues that have been historically neglected and overlooked. In the recent 2013 General Elections in Malaysia out of 35 full ministerial position only two, or 5.7% have been filled by women. In each of the 2009, 2010, and in the present 2013 Cabinet members, there have only been two women ministers, with this number reduced to one briefly when the Prime Minister appointed himself placeholder in the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. In the recent past, in its Election Manifesto, Barisan Nasional made a pledge of 'increasing the number of women participating in national decision-making processes'. Even after such pledges, the Malaysian leadership has failed to mirror the strong presence of women in leadership positions of public life which primarily includes politics, the judiciary and in business. There has been a strong urge to political parties by various gender-sensitive groups to nominate more women as candidates for contesting elections at the Parliamentary as well as at the State level. The democratization process will never be truly democratic without a proper gender agenda and representation. Although Malaysia signed the Beijing Platform for Action document in 1995, the state has a long way to go in enhancing the participation of women in every segment of Malaysian political, economic and cultural. There has been a small percentage of women representation in decision-making bodies compared to the 30% targeted by the Beijing Platform for Action. Thus, democratization in terms of representation of women in leadership positions and decision-making positions or bodies is essential since it's a move towards a qualitative transformation of women in shaping national decision-making processes. The democratization process has to ensure women's full participation and their goals of development and their full participation has to be included in the process of formulating and shaping the developmental goals.

Keywords : women, gender equality, Islam, democratization, political representation, Parliament

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