

WOMEN IN POLITICS

Equal gender representation should begin in political parties

WE have eight years to go before 2030, a year in which we have stood in solidarity with other countries to realise the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

One of the SDG agendas is gender equality, where women and men shall be given equal opportunities in the political, economic and other fields.

However, we are still far behind compared with other developing countries in giving recognition to women as representatives in politics.

The 14th General Election (GE14) saw the best achievement of women in the national political arena, when one was appointed as deputy prime minister for the first time in the country's history.

GE14 also for the first time saw a record of five women being appointed as cabinet ministers in the aftermath.

In politics, however, Malaysia has shown stagnant progress for decades with respect to women's participation.

The country does not have any quotas or law to reserve the place



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for women either at the legislative or executive level.

At the moment, only 15 per cent of women hold seats in the House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat), lower than the universal standard of 30 per cent.

The same scenario may be seen in the current cabinet, where only five women held the position of minister.

The increase in the percentage of women parliamentarians has been relatively slow and small-scale. On average, it is only at a rate of one to four per cent in each general election.

Therefore, the objective of achieving 30 per cent women parliamentarians in Malaysia is seen as difficult to achieve in the next 25 to 30 years if no specific

law or policy is introduced to address it.

Based on data from the Election Commission in 2018, out of 687 candidates who contested at the parliamentary level in GE14, only 75 were women.

The decision to field a candidate to contest in a constituency is determined by the leadership of the political party by taking into account factors such as racial population, background and the ability of the candidate to win the constituency seat.

Therefore, the agenda to mainstream women's representation in Parliament should start with the political parties first because the system of parliamentary democracy in Malaysia is formed through consociationalism — a coalition of political parties.

The introduction of gender quotas by voluntary political parties (VPPQ) for the selection of election candidates is a good start to boost women's participation in national politics, such as placing at least one-third of all GE candidates among women.

This will increase the likelihood for more women to win seats in Parliament.

A total of 127 countries have introduced affirmative action by giving specific quotas to women either in the form of provisions enshrined in national constitutions, party constitutions or electoral laws.

Among the countries that have adapted the VPPQ systems are South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Turkey, France and Germany.

In the meantime, political parties should also encourage the involvement of women to contest for positions in the party by no longer normalising the position of "leader" to men only.

Referring to data from the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), countries that implement gender quotas as a national policy have managed to achieve at least 25 to 30 per cent of women's representation in parliament on average.

Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam also enforce gender quotas in an effort to empower women in the national political arena.

It is also important to emphasise that gender quotas also have

certain challenges, such as the perception that the quotas are a privileged treatment that is concerned only to fill women's seats without considering the credibility of its holders.

It goes without saying that gender equality is a never ending story of humanity because inequality between women and men has been deeply-rooted for so long in society.

Among the major challenges is the cultural struggle of how society views on giving women equal rights as men, especially in the context of cultural diversity in Malaysia.

In addition, political will is also equally critical, especially among policymakers at the legislative level.

Thus, this vision requires collaborative efforts from all, including the government, political leaders, non-governmental organisations, as well as the fellow Malaysian community.

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