

MALAYSIAN POLITICAL PARTIES' ROLES IN ENHANCING WOMEN'S AGENDA: A CASE STUDY OF THE 14TH GENERAL ELECTION MANIFESTOS

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the role of Malaysian political parties in enhancing women's agendas through their election manifestos. This study analyses political parties' election manifestos in the Malaysian 14th General Election in 2018 using the gender policy matrix. It identifies that political parties have included women's agendas in their manifestos to attract more female voters. The study also finds large differences among political parties in terms of numbers and types of women's agendas included in their election manifestos. This paper proposes that political parties need to improve on their gender cards, especially considering that women make up 49 percent of the Malaysian population. The lack of female agendas in their manifestos indicates the absence of political will to address female related issues.

Keyword: Gender politics, election, social harmony, political inclusion

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Introduction

Women are severely underrepresented in the political sphere across the globe despite the international efforts to increase their participation, primarily through the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Beijing Platform of Action. Based on the data provided by the UN Women, there are only 24 percent of female representatives in the legislature, and only 18 percent hold ministerial positions. This data shows slow progress since the international conventions were adopted and ratified in 1979 and 1995. Malaysia is lagging behind its gender empowerment policies despite a dedicated ministry focusing on women affairs, namely the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development, established in 2001. The Global Gap Index 2020 ranked Malaysia 104th out of 153 countries, which further slips from the 70th out of 144 countries in 2017. The Gender Gap Index measures four categories: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. In the domain of political empowerment, Malaysia is ranked at 117 out of 153 countries in 2020 compared to 90 out of 114 countries in 2006. Despite the high scores in educational attainment and health and survival, it does not translate well into political empowerment and economic participation and opportunity for Malaysian women.

The gap between all the domains must be further studied, and the slow progress made in the Malaysian political scene to be more inclusive for women need to be further analyzed. The absence of a quota system in Malaysia's electoral system or voluntary political party quota system further exacerbates the female political empowerment crisis. This article explores on the role of political parties in enhancing women political empowerment through an analysis of their general election manifestos. This article analyses the existing literatures related to democracy and gender politics, followed by research methodology employed and discussion on the inclusion of gender agendas by political parties. This paper aims to look into the role of political parties in Malaysia to enhance women through descriptive representation during the 14th General Election by analyzing the visibility of gender agendas in their election.

Literature Review

Democracy and Gender Politics

Apart from the state institution that is often highlighted as the principal-agent to empower women politically, political parties play an equally important role as a vital institution to ensure women's voices in the formal decision-making structures and processes. It is due to political parties' role in democratic and semi-democratic settings in which it is the agent of power. Moten and Islam (2011) define political parties as an "association of individuals with a common set of belief and political goals, sharing a desire to take control of the government by constitutional.

Despite the importance of political parties, it remains understudied mainly in gender politics. The current literature focuses more on state institution (Annesley & Gains, 2010; Garcia-Del Moral, 202; da Silva & Paradis, 2020) and the representation of women in all three branches of government, legislature, executive, and judiciary (Itzkovich-Malka & Friedberg, 2018; Rameez, 2018; Williams, 2018). However, it mainly does not dwell on political parties as a political institution that acts as gatekeepers to women's access to politics. Several authors analyze the effectiveness of female empowerment policies such as the implementation of a quota system in facilitating female representation by political parties (Meier & Lombardo, 2013; Krook & Zetterberg, 2014; Clayton, 2015; Akbar, 2018; Verge, 2020).

Nevertheless, the discussion on political parties should not be limited to quotas' discussion but need to include the behavioral patterns of political parties in responding to gender empowerment agendas by both international and local political actors especially considering that female political representation in Southeast Asia in general are still lagging behind despite attempts of several countries to increase female political representation through quota and proportional representation (PR) electoral systems (Choi, 2018).

As a former colony of the British, Malaysia gained her independence in 1957, in which women were automatically granted the right to vote. The electoral system practiced is first past the post (FPP), which has often been criticized to exclude marginalized groups in society, including women in comparison to proportional representation (PR) as the

latter allows more excellent representation in the legislature and often seen as friendlier to women in an election (Fortin-Rittberger & Rittberger, 2014; Verge & Wiesehomeier, 2019). As first past the post (FPTP) electoral system limits the winner, it results in a more dynamic and complex political party's culture that, at times, acts as constraints for women to be fielded in elections (Hennings & Usbatsch, 2015). Men have long dominated the Malaysian political scene, and the hegemonic masculinity of politics has resulted in women's subordination in politics (Syarifah Shahirah & Rashila, 2016). These marginalize women in decision-making processes, although 49 percent of Malaysians are women. Syarifah Shahirah and Rashilah (2016) state that political parties do not emphasize gender as a factor to be considered for election candidatures. They identify that female candidate are often allocated seats prone to defeat in the 13th General Election across political parties.

Malaysia has experienced a dominant political party system since its independence in 1957. Malaysia's political system is heavily mired with ethnic-based interests, as illustrated by establishing ethnic-based political parties. The significant component parties of the former ruling coalition, *Barisan Nasional*, is led by United Malay National Organization (UMNO) with other major component parties represent the minority ethnic groups such as Chinese represented by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Indians represented by Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). In 1999, Malaysia experienced a reformation movement that significantly challenged the dominance of *Barisan Nasional* after almost four decades of consistent victories.

In 2008, the opposition parties denied *Barisan Nasional* its two-thirds share of parliament seats since independence. In GE14, it sees that *Barisan Nasional* lost for the first time in Malaysia's history to the opposition coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* (Alliance of Hope), which consist of heavyweight opposition parties such as *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and two newly formed parties which are splinter parties from UMNO and *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) namely *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (BERSATU) and *Parti Amanah Negara* (AMANAH).

Ng, Tan, and Maznah (2006) found that the increasing influence of the opposition coalition since 1999 has helped gender issues and feminist movements to penetrate the mainstream political arenas, which was absent in the policy debates prior to that. This

also translates into the utilization of gender agendas by political parties as a tool to garner votes, as illustrated in the visibility of gender agendas in both contesting coalitions' election manifestos. The 14th General Election saw the defeat of *Barisan Nasional* for the first time in Malaysian history after its independence to the opposition coalition, *Pakatan Harapan*, which was formally formed only a few months before the election date. Various factors have resulted in the unexpected outcome of GE14, namely financial scandal, digital penetration of political campaigns, and the return of heavyweight politicians such as Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's former prime minister who was also in power for more than two decades. However, Wong and Ooi (2018) find that the change of government in 2018 has not resulted in the improvement of female political representation significantly.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers examined the 14th General Election manifestos of three main political coalitions (*Barisan Nasional*, *Pakatan Harapan*, and GAGASAN). They conducted content analysis by employing gender policy matrix developed by Htun and Weldon (2010) in analyzing political parties' electoral manifestos concerning women issues. Content analysis enables researchers to group texts in similar themes and identify the important aspects of the issue explored (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

The gender policy matrix developed by Htun and Weldon (2010) categorizes the types of gender policies as pushed by women's movements onto the state into two: (1) policies that aim to improve women's position in society either through the improvement of their status or economic status; and (2) policies that challenge or does not challenge the conventional beliefs and norms of the society. In addition to the GE 14th manifestos, the researchers also conducted elite interviews with politicians across political coalitions (except for Sabah and Sarawak based political coalitions) as part of triangulation process. This enables richer interpretation of the findings as it utilizes multiple data sources (Renz et.al, 2018).

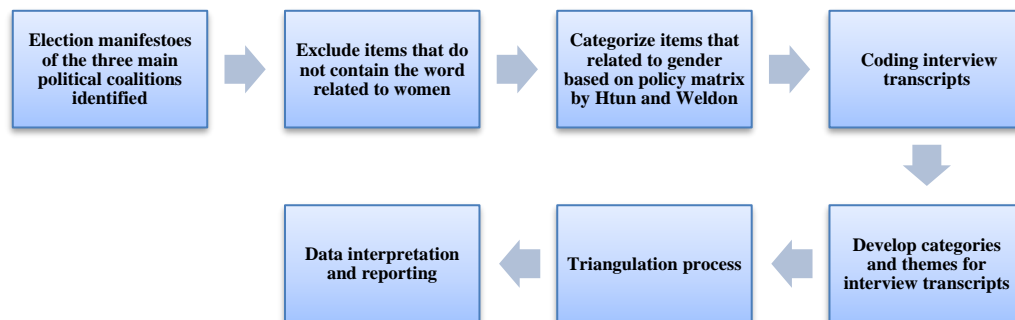


Figure 1: Flow chart of content analysis.

DISCUSSION

Gender-Based Agendas in GE14 Election Manifestos

An election manifesto is one of the most powerful tools used by political parties to gain power in a general election. The manifesto is not only used by political parties to appeal to the broader pool of potential voters but also to ensure the satisfaction of current members and activists (Harmel, 2018). Election manifesto aims to set out the direction of the political parties and an important document that can gauge the principles and values of political parties. Brouard, Grossman, Guinaudeau, Persico, and Froio (2018) have shown that a pre-electoral manifesto can influence policymaking depending on partisan capacities and incentives. Nazri (2019) argues that the ability of the opposition coalition to produce united and practical policies in their election manifesto led the public to imagine the opposition as viable government in 2013 and 2018 elections and serve as benchmarking tool in measuring the government of the day's performances.

GE14 in Peninsular Malaysia saw three-corner fights between the then ruling coalition, *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), the newly formed opposition coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* (Alliance of Hope), and a smaller coalition called GAGASAN, which was led by *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (Malaysia Islamists Party). The fierce fight can be seen in the publication of election manifestos by the three political blocs in which all three political coalitions included gender agendas. Maznah (2002) sees 'gender' became a terrain that both government and opposition were keen to have a handle on in 1999, in

which the wave of reforms movement has sparked a more excellent debate of women inclusion in politics as the ruling coalition at that time felt the heat of the increasing influence of the opposition coalition led by the Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime Minister. He was sacked allegedly for political motives. This paper analyses the gender agendas forwarded by the political parties in GE14 through their election manifestos to identify the types of gender agendas pushed by political parties in their attempt to woo voters.

Table 1: Percentage of Gender Agendas in GE14 Election Manifestos

Political Coalition	Gender Agendas	Overall Pledges	Percentage (%)
Barisan Nasional	25	341	7.3
Pakatan Harapan	29	101	28.7

All three coalitions have forwarded gender agendas in their election manifestos; with all three have specific sections on women in their published election manifestos. *Pakatan Harapan* has the highest percentage of gender agendas in their manifesto at 28.7 percent, followed by *Barisan Nasional* at staggeringly low 7.3 percent and GAGASAN at 6.57 percent. *Pakatan Harapan*, as an opposition coalition, has been supported by women movement from various groups, including the Islamist groups since 1999. It has provided more generous space for women movement to be more involved in Malaysia political processes (Ng, 2010) which explain the higher percentage of gender agendas in *Pakatan Harapan* election manifestos.

The study employs a gender policy matrix developed by Htun and Weldon (2010) in analyzing political parties' electoral manifestos concerning women. Based on Table 2, the political parties have chosen gender issues considered non-controversial to be included in their election manifestos. All coalitions have focused mainly on the commitment to non-doctrinal gender policies, which, according to Htun and Weldon (2010), do not defy the existing social norms through amendment of legislation. Only two doctrinal gender-based policies found in the election manifestos, which are: 1) the improvement of existing family laws, especially in shariah courts (both *Barisan Nasional* and *Pakatan Harapan*), and 2) to set 18 as the minimum age for marriage (*Pakatan Harapan*)

Table 2: Types of Gender Agendas in the GE14 Election Manifestos

		Yes (Doctrinal)	Do these policies challenge religious doctrine or codified cultural traditions?						
			BN	PH	GAGASAN	No (Non-doctrinal)	BN	PH	GAGASAN
Do these policies empower women as status group or address social inequalities?	Gender-status policies	Family Law	x	x		Gender quotas in politics	x	x	
						Violence against women	x	x	
		Minimum age of marriage		x		Inclusion of gender perspective in public policy formulation and implementation		x	
						Women friendly education policies	x	x	x
						Enhancement of social support services to women	x	x	x
	Class-based policies				Parental leave	x	x		
					Federal funds for mother and child care		x	x	
					Workplace equality		x		
					Healthcare incentives		x	x	
					Economic empowerment	x	x	x	
					Access to education	x			

As Malaysia practices a duality of the legal system consist of civil and shariah law, Muslim family matters fall under the jurisdiction of *shariah* courts. Malaysian *shariah* courts are often criticized as patriarchal institutions that often pose problems and issues to women, especially when it comes to family law matters and in need of legal reforms (Moustafa, 2013, Abdullah et.al, 2015). However, *Barisan Nasional* mentioned specifically the reform of *sharia* courts in matters related to family law but did not mention anything on the reform of civil court in the same matter. This means that it is explicitly addressing Muslim women's issues, which reflect the dynamic of Malaysian politics that emphasize ethnic and religious political identity rather than gender identity. GAGASAN that is known as a conservative Islamist political coalition did not indicate any commitment towards doctrinal gender policies and mainly focused on non-doctrinal gender status policies which reinforce entrenched traditional gender roles in Malaysian society such as one-off financial assistance for women who want to start working from home and the introduction of Home Maker Professional scheme aiming for women to be employed as domestic workers for other working women. GAGASAN is more concerned with preserving traditional values that are deemed as in line with their religious, political identity.

All party coalitions stated women's economic empowerment agendas in their manifestos as it is viewed as the safest gender agendas for developing economies such as Malaysia. The economic empowerment initiatives were mentioned in various forms, such as providing state resources to assist women entrepreneurs such as microcredit schemes, the establishment of state institutions specifically to address women's economic status, and the introduction of training programs to enhance women employability skills. The same pattern is observed in the enhancement of social support and women-friendly education policies. These two issues are considered less controversial and are more likely to receive support from the mass public. Only *Barisan Nasional* and *Pakatan Harapan* pledged to increase gender quotas for women in politics. *Barisan Nasional* mentioned having 30 percent of women in the Upper Chamber in Parliament and across civil service. On the other hand, *Pakatan Harapan* takes a different approach by emphasizing training and education as well as recognizing the importance of reform in political parties' selection and election mechanisms in ensuring a higher percentage of women involvement in politics at the national level.

Despite *Pakatan Harapan* having the highest percentage of gender agendas in their manifesto, they still lack the political will to include more controversial gender issues such as reproductive rights. The focus of *Pakatan Harapan's* proposed gender policies remains on non-doctrinal policies for both gender and class-based policies. The emphasis of *Pakatan Harapan's* proposed gender policies is mainly on three aspects: (1) educating gender values, (2) inclusion of gender values in all levels of public policy formulation and implementation, and (3) enhancing the level of women's healthcare and well-being. Political parties were still very cautious in the types of gender agendas they present to potential voters and prefer to emphasize issues that can highlight their concern for women without being controversial and cost them Malaysian votes.

As a political institution, the political parties remain highly patriarchal and male-dominant (Maznah, 2018; Alicia, 2019). Scholars have documented their analysis on political parties as old boys club which lead to the lack of political will of political parties' leadership to push for female empowerment in their parties or ministerial positions in the executive branch of government as political parties' structure continue to treat women as supporters and sideline them from being directly included in the political process (Kartini, 2014, Yeong, 2018). This explains political parties' continuous reluctance to bring forward controversial and doctrinal gender issues in their political parties' manifestos, as shown. In interviews with politicians across political parties, it is found that political parties' structures also resulted in women's marginalization in the 14th General Election.

“...but I think DAP is still controlled by men even though they fielded female candidates in the election...as for PPBM, it is a splinter party from UMNO, therefore, they still carry the traditional mindset even though they agreed to have more women. You can see that men still dominate their line-up...only PKR is more forefronts in championing women”

(PKR MP)

“I think when it started to have women's wing is to actually give women the platform to take up decision role for the party when at the time, they are not encouraged to take decision role in the main party (the Central Committee). There are lesser chances for them. Probably the women's wing will encourage them to take up the decision role instead... But then again, probably due to problem of such long scenario, there is still not much young women. My central committee, there are only three women”

(Gerakan Youth leader)

“.... Although women should be given opportunity in political parties’ leadership position, but because men dominated the positions, the victory often go to men...there are several UMNO branch chiefs that are female such as in Pengerang, Pendang, Sungai Petani, and Sabah...the main challenges is the warlords on the ground. Women need to be warlords”

(UMNO’s Supreme Council Member)

As Malaysian politics grapple with ethnic and religious identity, gender often takes a backseat in political parties’ priority list. As the country practices First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system, which only has a single winner for each constituency, there is less motivation for political parties to push for doctrinal female empowerment agenda to the voters in the 14th General Election manifestos as they did not want to risk losing conservative voters’ support to win seats in the parliament and state assemblies. Scholars have proposed that proportional representation (PR) electoral system is a viable alternative to a multicultural society such as Malaysia as it can represent diverse groups in society and accommodate minority groups in the decision-making process, including women (Alicia, 2019; Wong, 2020). Despite that, Malaysia still sees a long way for any drastic institutional reform, including the electoral system due the lack of political will especially by the political parties to ensure higher level of women inclusion in political process.

Conclusion

Although women's agendas were included in election manifestos in the Malaysian general election, its implementation remains rhetorical in the Malaysian case. Women agendas in election manifestos are used as a political tool by political parties to appease potential voters, women movements, and international organizations. Political parties remain a dominantly patriarchal institution that is reluctant to embrace women's agendas as it disrupts the existing status quo. This influences women's participation in politics as political parties remain "the old boys club" in which women have to adopt different values and characteristics to be part of it. The absence of political parties' political will to address pertinent gender issues such as implementing political quota system signals that political parties are reluctant to change their highly gendered structure. This study finds that political parties do not have adequate political will to reform the existing political structure and system to encourage more women to be actively involved in the political

process. This is illustrated through the lack of female doctrinal issues being brought up as part of the manifesto.

This slow progress of female empowerment despite Malaysia's commitment to empowering half of its population further marginalizes women's voices in the policymaking process. To have a more excellent representation of women in parliament and state legislative assemblies also is a democratic imperative of Article 8 (2) of the Malaysian Constitution, which prohibits discriminatory acts based on gender:

“There shall be no discrimination against citizens on the ground only of religion, race, descent, place of birth or gender in any law or in the appointment to any office or employment under a public authority or in the administration of any law relating to the acquisition, holding or disposition of property or the establishing or carrying on of any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment”.

Malaysian political parties need to improve their game in empowering women in politics. Political parties in Malaysia need to ensure that gender empowerment is the crux of political parties' vision of a democratic and equal Malaysia and not remains rhetorical and only used as empty promises in electoral manifestos. Currently, no political parties in Malaysia have systematic structure and policies (such as quota) regarding women's representation as top party's leadership, electoral candidates, or as appointed members of legislature and executive.

This paper has contributed to understanding the pattern of political parties' responses towards the demands of female empowerment and inclusion in political processes by analyzing gender agendas in election manifestos. It identifies that political parties responded to the pressure to include more gender agendas in their election manifestos by all three main political coalitions. However, it is still marginal in comparison to other agendas in the election manifestos. This research can be further extended to look into implementing the election manifestos by the winning political party. In addition to that, further research can explore political parties' behavior and attitude towards female representation and gender agendas in Malaysia.

Gender empowerment may come as a challenge to traditional values in conservative Malaysia. However, women deserve the right to be heard as they have long

been marginalized in favor of ethnic and religious identities. Political parties need to take equal responsibility as an agent of gender empowerment as the political institution that serves as the medium between the government and the people and is directly involved in gaining power. They have the responsibility to serve the people, in which they have to be continuously reminded that 49 percent of Malaysia consists of women.

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