

KOREA: SAVVY TACTICS

By Hong Chun Hee



Kim Hyen Mi

Introduction

Korea (South) is a country that has instituted an election system since 1948. Within the system, the country has experienced the simple majority, proportional representation as well as a mixed system. Women candidates have participated in the different election systems.

In this case study of the Republic of Korea (commonly known as South Korea), it traces the personal and professional road undertaken by a lawmaker¹ Kim Hyen Mi² (43 years old) who ran for the central committee of the Uri party. Kim Hyen Mi is a politician who became ‘the first university-graduate female party executive’ and, by coincidence, started to work in a political party. She became a lawmaker through the proportional representation after 18 years of activities in the party where she worked on strategising other people’s election campaigns. It was only in 2005 when she had the opportunity to plan her own election. Even if the proportional representation was made only within the party, it was very meaningful since it gave a chance to evaluate her 18-year-old political activities and reflect upon her vestige in history of Korean politics.

¹ In South Korea, a member of parliament is known as a lawmaker. This term will be used throughout this chapter.

² Korea has produced many female politicians with substantial development in women’s rights movement since 1990s. As this project is designed to reveal the dynamic relationship between female politicians and women’s right movement through election, it would be more appropriate to take an example from a lawmaker elected from a local constituency than a proportional representation system. However, a lawmaker who was suitable for the condition of this project couldn’t have an interview because of health problems. And Kim Hyen Mi who had been elected from a proportional representative system, and the main subject of this study, could do an interview. In the very nick of time, the Uri party was ahead of its central committee election and Kim was in the race. So Kim Hyen Mi’s case was used as it was also meaningful to introduce inner party election.



Korea's Socio-Economic and Political Status

Korea has developed its industry and democratic system for the past 60 years since it was liberated from Japanese imperialism. Even while confrontation between South and North Korea is still under way, democratisation has made progress; the opportunity for education has been expanded and women's rights were rapidly strengthened. However, pro-economic development policy gave birth to adverse effects such as widening disparities between the rich and the poor, and disseminating conflicts in generations and regions. Some of these adverse effects may have fueled the economic crisis in 1997.

The most remarkable change within Korean society in recent days is the substantial growth in individual freedom. Under military rule in the 1960s and 1970, individual freedom had shrunk, but it was rapidly expanded in the midst of democratisation of 1980s. In particular, the rights of women and labourers were outstandingly promoted. Women's social status was heightened with increased chances of advancement within society. Recently, importance on female human power is further emphasised with the rise of knowledge-information industry.

Korea, which has a population of 47.9 million, is now making efforts to achieve economic and political stability in the course of democratising the country. However, uncomfortable relationship between politics and economy is constantly revealed. Sayings such as 'Politics comes as a stumbling block in the road of economy' or 'Economic advancement is not made without high quality politics' reflect the uneasy relationship between political actors and economic entities. But those conflicts are often common in a transitional period towards lasting cooperation between the two sides.

The Election System

Korea proclaimed Statute 175, the election regulation for lawmakers, on March 17, 1948 under the rule of the US military administration and held a nationwide election on May 10 of the same year. Korea adopted a representational system that elects only one candidate who gets the highest number of votes in a small constituency in case of election for the National Assembly members and local assembly. An electoral district determines a vote in the National Assembly. That refers to the opinions of 'committee of election determination'. In case of a proportional representation system, a certain number of members are assigned to a party in proportion to the number of percentage votes it obtained in the local constituencies of general election. But this system was changed since it could be misinterpreted that voters support a party that includes a candidate who obtain the highest votes. From the 17th general election performed on April 15, 2004, a new system



was put in place. Each voter is allowed two votes, one for a candidate and the other for a party.

Since a present system of small constituency system can give rise to spoilt votes, it is not efficient to reflect public opinions, thus, undermining the advance of small parties or political beginners into the Assembly. At the same time it reduces a portion for a proportional representative at the cost of its original purpose, a vocational representation and secure in professionals. A proportional representation system that follows a party voting list in a big constituency is desirable in order to resolve the problems above and encourage the participation in politics from various groups within a society.

Kim Hyen Mi ran for the National Assembly in a proportional representation system because she thought it would be favorable for her since her long-time service as a party executive in a central party would not have much influence in a local constituency. She had planned to run in a local constituency in the next election where she would promote herself by using activities in the Assembly and as a party executive. To this end, she ran for the election to become a central committee member. The Uri party consists of four standing central committee members and 72 central committee members representing the public. The Uri party carries out four votes per person in the central committee election. The poll rate was 81%, which meant 1,932 representatives out of the total 2,387 voted and Kim Hyen Mi took the top post of Kyounggido committee by getting 736 votes and became a chairperson of women's affair committee which is usually taken by the one who gets the most polling scores among women candidates.

Since, unlike the general election, the central committee election is performed based on four votes per person, a number of variables should be considered in predicting a result. For example, voters will mark candidates in the order of preference excluding the least preferable ones and they are likely to choose male and female candidates alternatively. Therefore, even among female candidates, the one who gets high recognition from the party men is likely to succeed in getting higher votes.

Korea's Politics and Women's Participation in Politics

Women's participation in politics was discussed earnestly in 1991 with the resurrection of local autonomy system. It emerged as a major focus of the feminist movement in the country. However, the number of women in politics did not increase remarkably in the 1990s. Starting from the 17th General Election in 2004, women's involvement in politics was expanded³.

³ A number of female politicians made inroads into the National Assembly since the 17th general election. However, there were already many women lawmakers who had been



The quotas for women in the proportional representation system were increased to 50%, doubling the number of women lawmakers compared with that of the 16th General Election. Table 1 shows the present status of women lawmakers in the National Assembly.

Table 1: The Status of Women Lawmakers in National Assembly (1948-2004)

The National Assembly	The total number of lawmakers	The total number of female Lawmakers	The number of female lawmakers (direct election)	The number of female lawmakers (The national constituency)
1 st (1948)	200	1(0.5%)	1	-
2 nd (1950)	210	2(0.9%)	2	-
3 rd (1954)	203	1(0.5%)	1	-
4 th (1958)	233	3(1.3%)	3	-
5 th (1960)	233	1(0.4%)	1	-
6 th (1963)	175	2(1.1%)	1	1
7 th (1967)	175	3(1.7%)	1	2
8 th (1971)	204	5(2.5%)	0	5
9 th (1973, stage1)	219	11(5.8%)	2	9
(1973, stage 2)	(219)	8(3.7%)	(2)	6
10 th (1978)	231	8(3.5%)	1	7
11 th (1981)	276	9(3.3%)	1	8
12 th (1985)	276	8(2.9%)	2	6
13 th (1988)	299	6(2.0%)	0	6
14 th (1992)	299	8(2.7%)	1	7
15 th (1996)	299	10(3.0%)	3	7
16 th (2000)	273	16(5.9%)	5	11
17 th (2004)*	299	39(13%)	10	29
Total	4,323	139(3.2%)	35	104

Source: Kim Won Hong, 2002: 48. and author's field data, 2004.

engaged in women's right movement before. Lee Mi Kyoung, Han Myoung Sook who served as representatives of Korean Womenlink, Kim Hee Sun who was a representative of Korea Women's Hotline, Lee Kyoung Sook who held the post of Korean Womenlink from the 17th assembly, Son Bon Sook who established Korean Institute for Women & Politics, and Lee Gye Kyoung, ex-president of the Women's News. Women's circle has also been making its efforts to expand women's advancement into a political circle in a local scene as well as in a central government and female politicians are making brisk activities, in fact.



Since Korean women obtained suffrage in 1948⁴, their political rights were ensured legally; but their participation rate in the Assembly and local assembly is very slight. Even though their suffrage had been secured legally, women's right movement resisted the mainstream politics under the military rule. Under the circumstances, participating in politics was considered as damaging in the original meaning of women's right movement. The movement remained critical against incumbent political system (Oh-Chang Mi Kyoung, 2004: 260)

Due to the adverse notion against politics, women's interest in politics was small but the possibility of advancement into the political circle was expanded with the establishment of local autonomy. The local assembly is relatively easier to enter into than its central counterpart in terms of the election cost and the availability of seats. It was asserted that the environment was conducive to women's role as well (Kim Kyoung Ae, 2001: 5). Under these circumstances, a women's circle including various women's organisations formed a coalition to expand women's participation and penetration into the political arena even if each organisation has slightly different political positions and goals.

Table 2: Women Lawmakers in the Metropolitan and Local Assembly, (1995-2002)

Year		Metropolitan Assembly						Local Assembly		
		Total	Women		%		Total	Women	%	
1995	Local constituency	972	875	56	13	5.8	1.5	4,541	71	1.6
	Proportional		97		43		44.3			
1998	Local	690	616	41	14	5.9	2.3	3,490	56	1.4
	Proportional		74		27		36.5			
2002	Local	682	609	63	14	9.2	2.3	3,485	77	2.2
	Proportional		73		49		67.1			

Source: Korean Womenlink 2002, 5.

The collective activities by women's organisations for the past 10 years fall into three major areas. First, there is the movement that encouraged a quota system in elections as a part of improvement of the system. Second, the establishment of 'Female Politics Network' and 'Women's Association for the 17th General Election' by the association of female politics organisations and research institutes. Third, the creation of 'Woman Power 2004', a network

⁴ Women were represented in the 10th General Election in 1948. However, it was not meaningful to women, in particular, or politics, in general. This is because the election was designed by the U.S. military administration to establish a government with rightists only while ostracising leftists and moderates (Lee Sung Hee, 1994: 182).



that supports female candidates who won the election (Kim Eun Kyoung, 2004: 283-286). Table 2 shows the percentage of women lawmakers at the Metropolitan and Local Assembly levels.

As a result of those efforts, party convention rules had been revised and a new clause that allocates female candidates to 30% among total candidates in a proportional representative system was made prior to the 16th General Election in 2000. Another revision in the convention rule that assigns 50% of metropolitan proportional representative candidacy to women was made before the 2002 local election. Then, the names of 101 female candidates were announced by political parties after recommendation, education and requests were made to each political party. Out of the total 101 candidates, 39 had won on the 17th General Election where 18 were recommended by ‘Woman Power 2004’ (Nam-Yun Insoon, 2004:18).

All those associations were made in order to strengthen women’s political voices. Women’s circle has made great efforts to consolidate women’s voices by introducing a quota system, producing eligible candidates and debating on the problems of electoral district system (Hong Chun Hee, 2005: 4). Women’s circle has made great contributions to expand women’s participation in politics. However, it is also true that women politicians were generally found in some specific areas such as women’s circle, the academic and the legal world. Most of the candidates of the National Assembly are active politicians or party men followed by legal professional and educators. But in case of women, not only the numbers of working politicians are small but their percentage compared to men in a party is very low. In particular, women’s percentage in the central party is below 10%.

Table 3: The Percentage of Women in the Ruling and the Opposition Party in 2002

		The Grand National Party		The Democratic Party*	
The party leadership	Male	74	68	66	60
	Female		6 (8.1%)		6 (9.1%)
Executive member of a party	Male	45	43	102	92
	Female		2 (4.4%)		10 (9.8%)
Executive member of central party secretariat	Male	128	116	167	153
	Female		12 (9.4%)		14 (8.4%)
Total	Male	247	227	335	305
	Female		20 (8.1%)		30 (9.0%)

Source: Kim Jung Sook, 2003: 28.

* The Uri Party was formed by the reform-minded party members of the Democratic Party.



Active politicians and party members account for most of the candidates who won seats in the Assembly and women are very rare among them. This indicates the difficulty in finding and cultivating female politicians. Regarding this trend, it was natural for political parties to recruit well-known women from outside and women's circle responded to their demand. At present, that is the major path for women to enter into politics in Korea.

Case Study: Kim Hyen Mi

Childhood/Education

Kim Hyen Mi was born as the second daughter of eight children to a wealthy rural landlord in Jeongeup, North Cholla province in 1962. Thanks to the wealth of her family, she enjoyed a wholesome childhood with her siblings and went through formal schooling without economic difficulties. Kim's family adhered to Confucian custom that includes a notion of preferring a son to a daughter, an idea prevalent among rural people then. So they regarded education for girls as a means of finding a good spouse in the future. People thought that girls' destiny do not change with their marriage regardless of their level of education.

Kim Hyen Mi's family had keenly been interested in politics for many generations. Her grandfather was a lawmaker before the Korean War and her father was a chairman of the city council. But Kim's family started leaning increasingly towards conservative tendencies with the death of her grandfather during the Korean War. While growing up, Kim Hyen Mi always thought that she should be superior to men in many ways since she had undergone sexism growing up in the family. She did her best in whatever endeavors, in her studies as well as in social circle (including fighting with a boy when the situation called for it!). She was such a tomboy in her teens that she could not bear the school education system that emphasised femininity.

Kim went through an important incident in her life when she was a high school student. She was attending a Catholic boarding school and witnessed a protest by Catholic priests and nuns who went against the government's clampdown on laborers in Dong-il Textile. Shocked by the brutal crackdown on the religious leaders by the police, Kim thought that something was really wrong. That incident changed Kim Hyen Mi who had vaguely conceived by then that everybody should take status quo and be patient since the country was going through a difficult time.



Another decisive incident that had influenced Kim was the Gwangju Democratic Uprising⁵ in 1980. The chaotic situation in 1980 gave Kim an obscure but strong impression that the Korean society was moving in the wrong direction. After the incident, Kim entered Yonsei University in Seoul and joined a debating society and experienced a student movement. She wondered a lot then whether or not she would devote herself to a student movement or not. Kim's major was politics but she chose it not because she wanted to be a politician but because it was relatively easier for her to do two things: studying for the degree while at the same time being actively involved in student movements. It is quite interesting and ironic that Kim Hyen Mi became a politician; she used to have a very poor opinion of politics.

After graduating from Yonsei University, Kim was engaged in the labour movement. Her affirmation to activism was so firm that she just left a letter at home that she would not come back before South Korea and North Korea were reunified. Initially, she obtained a job at a fluorescent light bulb factory under a pseudonym. By the time she had worked in the factory for six months, she was found by her parents and was brought home by them. Since her parents wanted her to get married, Kim realised that she needed to find a full time position in order to stay away from home with her family approval. So she went to Seoul and was hired to work in the office of Kim Dae-jung. That was the turning point in her life.

Entrance into the Political Arena and Political Activities

Kim Hyen Mi worked as a publicist in Kim Dae-jung's office from 1987. Later Kim Dae-jung's office became known as the Democratic Constitution Research Centre which later became the Peace Democratic Party. With those structural changes, Kim Hyen Mi's found herself first working as a publicist, and then as a reporter of the party's paper. Even while working there, Kim Hyen Mi did not stop thinking of going back to work for the labour movement since she still distrusted politicians and harbored abhorrence against activities within the political arena. In 1987, she decided to focus on the labour movement after she finished covering the presidential election in

⁵ In the midst of mounting dissatisfaction against Park Jung Hee administration, President Park was killed. Then, General Chun Doo Hwan took over the regime through a military coup. People throughout the country protested against the military coup, calling for the removal of martial law, the release of democratic dissenters and the establishment of a democratic country. Unlike other places, Gwangju was brutally trampled by military. Not just protesters, the public was also suppressed by the military. A number of civilians in Gwangju fought against the military. But people in other places did not know that since roads to and from Gwangju were blocked and the press was prohibited from announcing the situation that occurred in Gwangju. This is referred to as 'Gwangju Democratic Uprising'.



December. But Kim Hyen Mi experienced two important incidents during a campaigning tour for Kim Dae-jung.

The first event occurred at Haei-do in Cholla Province, the birthplace of Kim Dae-jung. In the gathering and meetings with the people, Kim Dae-jung suggested many practical alternatives to solve the economic problems of Korea including debts in farming households. Kim Hyen Mi was deeply touched by the sincerity of the politician and felt that she had found a promising future with Kim Dae-jung.

The second important event was related to the assault inflicted by a rival party at the hotel in Pusan immediately after a campaign canvassing for votes. People from the Democratic Justice Party broke into the hotel room and attacked the Peace Democratic Party members by breaking furniture in the room. During this time, Kim Hyen Mi was also assaulted by the attackers. It was at this time that she felt that she reached the point of no return and decided to go with Kim Dae-jung for a change of regime. Through the two experiences, Kim Hyen Mi started as an opposition party executive member. The environment was new to her since her initial interest has always been with the labour movement. There were no female party leaders who graduated from higher education institutions then. Kim was the first female party executive with a university degree.

In 1991, the Peace Democratic Party cooperated with the United New Democratic Party. Among them was lawmaker Lee Woo Jung.⁶ She was the first person to ask Kim Hyen Mi to assist her since Kim knew the situation of the party well. So Kim Hyen Mi worked as a policy secretary of Lee Woo Jung between 1992 and 1995. Kim was quoted as saying that it was the first time for her to meet a person who is involved in feminist activity. Before that, Kim had not participated in any specific feminist activities or organisations except for the activity in women's affairs committee and women's department in the party. Working with Lee Woo Jung gave Kim Hyen Mi a chance to form a connection with 'Women Making Peace (WMP)'s Committee'. Now Kim Hyen Mi is providing direct support for the Director of the committee.

When Kim Hyen Mi first started working in a political party, it was just considered as a job to sustain her herself financially. However, she became an active member of the party leadership after witnessing incidents like those mentioned above. United New Democratic Party changed its name again and

⁶ Lee Woo Jung, born in 1923, graduated from Department of Theology in Korea Theology College. (presently the Hanshin University). She had been teaching there before she resigned in 1970 due to problems in the university and was engaged in human rights movement based on Christianity. She became the chairperson of Korea Women's Associations United in 1987 and played an active role in political arena as one of the supreme members of Democratic Party in 1991.



went through the presidential election in 1997 under the new name of The National Congress for New Politics. Then, Kim Hyen Mi took a position in the office of planning and coordination as the team leader of television monitoring analysis. That was suggested by then presidential candidate Kim Dae-jung saying that television reports related to the election should be closely watched. That was designed to supervise unfair press reports. So Kim Hyen Mi was responsible for watching and analysing press news at short intervals and sending the reports to 700 various organisations and people such as newspaper groups, scholars, civil organisations and labour unions on a weekly basis. That had never been tried before in the history of Korean politics. Thanks to the efforts, unfair press reports were prevented to a certain degree.

Kim Dae-jung was elected as the 15th president of Korea in 1997. After the election, Park Sun Sook, the Vice-Spokesperson of the party was chosen as the liaison for Cheong Wa Dae, the presidential place, and Kim Hyen Mi replaced Park's post in the party in January of 1998. Kim served as a spokesperson for five years i.e. until February of 2003. Through her job Kim Hyen Mi became well known.

Her days (and nights) were basically packed with news and press reports. She woke up with a wake-up call from evening paper reporters and fell a sleep listening to the ringing sound of the morning paper reporters' telephone for five years. Her sincere and diligent attitude and passion won confidence from reporters, impressing them 'Kim Hyen Mi never does the slip of the tongue'. In 2002 Kim assisted the presidential candidate Roh Moo Hyen on the 16th election retaining her post as a deputy spokesperson of the party. She was one of the major players who made an influence in the making of the 16th president by acting as an important spokesperson for Roh Moo Hyen. Kim Hyen Mi entered Cheong Wa Dae with President Roh Moo Hyen and played the role of a domestic press secretary and party policy secretary.

However, the supreme bureaucratic post was too heavy for Kim Hyen Mi who enjoys the much-freer atmosphere of the party. So she went back to the party on the occasion of the 17th General Election and assumed a position in public nomination for the election in the central election planning task group. It was after this position that Kim Hyen Mi became a lawmaker through proportional representation. There were two reasons why she could not run at the local constituency. First, she was too busy with the work at central election planning task group. Second, another candidate who ran in Kim Hyen Mi's hometown was a lawmaker who belonged to the same party. He is presently the Speaker of the National Assembly.

When Kim Hyen Mi was nominated for a candidate at the proportional representation, she obtained the highest points in the political area and was



recognised for being very competent. She came in third on the proportional representation list among women. After becoming a lawmaker, she carried out her task as a member of the National Assembly and the spokesperson of the party at the same time. Kim's career as a party member for a long period of time taught her the possibilities and limitations of the position. Therefore, she decided to become a legislator, believing that as a lawmaker she can accomplish more than just a rank-and-file party member.

Before the Election

Kim Hyen Mi is now a member of the National Policy Committee and Women's Affairs Committee in the National Assembly. She was chosen as an excellent lawmaker after the inspection of the government offices by civilian organisations in 2004. Kim Hyen Mi had known that lawmakers and the central committee of a party need to be in unity long before she even entered the National Assembly. She ran for the central committee and took the first place on the Uri party representative convention in Kyounggido on March 26th in 2005, unexpectedly overcoming her opponents who were second or third term male candidates. So Kim took the post of the chairperson of committee in Kyounggido and women's affair committee as well. The latter one is the post that is usually taken by whoever receives the most polling scores among women candidates.

Kim Hyen Mi had two goals. One was to run for the central committee of her party in order to enable the party and the Assembly to exchange views and opinions freely. And the other was to familiarise herself with Kyounggido in preparation for standing in the local constituency in next election.

Since Kim got a favorable position owing to her role as a spokesperson in the party, she also became a chairperson of women's affairs committee. Kim who had become a professional politician, did her best to collect votes from the floating class as well as supporters. It was clear that the representatives who had different positions with Kim Hyen Mi would never support her. Thus, she tried to muster support by appealing to floating voters at the same time.

Ahead of Kim Hyen Mi's visit to an electoral district in Kyounggido, her aides went to observe the public sentiment first. They tried to win support from voters by a showing humble attitude rather than pledging policies. Later, Kim Hyen Mi devised a suitable campaign for the region. Since it was an election within the party, the overall scale of the election was smaller than a nation-level one and it was effective for Kim Hyen Mi to gain support successfully from representatives by talking with them personally. Telephone stumping was successful as well. Her aides made effective publicity for Kim Hyen Mi by talking on the phone with representatives. It was more like a cursory election but her winning was attributed a lot to her aides since they



worked with such dedication. To her supporters she emphasised her image as a consistent and diligent pillar of the party especially as a competent vice-spokesperson. The total numbers of the representatives in Kyounggido were 2,387 and Kim got 736 votes and took the first place beating 11 candidates.

After the Election

Kim Hyen Mi never expected the top post of the Kyounggido committee. She ran to become the chairperson of women's affair committee and not the chairperson of the province committee. The unexpected result gave Kim Hyen Mi heavy responsibilities. She said that she had a difficult time falling asleep at night. Kyounggido is a huge province with a population of 11 million people, 31 cities and counties and 49 electoral districts. The supreme position of that big province demands heavy responsibilities. Since she had never even run for small elections, it was natural for her to feel overwhelmed and nervous.

The post had both positive and negative sides. It would be helpful for Kim Hyen Mi in that it would stimulate her to do a new and challenging job where tangible results could be expected if she is successful. When the post was filled by a nomination process, only lawmakers who are in their third-term (at least) would qualify. But after it had been changed to an elected post with the abolition of electoral district party chapter, the responsibility of the chair of the province committee was also expanded from coordinating to managing 49 electoral districts directly. Many tasks were added and its stature was consolidated accordingly.

When it comes to the negative side, Kim Hyen Mi says she was put on a test rather too soon. Kim Hyen Mi would compare politics to the growth of children saying that to become a good politician, one should take a step by step approach in order to maintain vitality and endurance. Otherwise, a political career would be fatally damaged sooner rather than later. Kim Hyen Mi's four-year schedule had already been booked with legislative activities. But it became more complicated and demanding with the undertaking of the important post.

"The best way to overcome this negative aspect is to know correctly where I am. Since I became a lawmaker, I should always be humble in the presence of colleague legislators or a nation. Otherwise my life as a politician would be finished soon", said Kim Hyen Mi. So she is trying to meet with other lawmakers who had been engaged in activities at the local constituencies and take their advice. Kim Hyen Mi pays more attention to establishing effective operation system for the Kyounggido committee than focusing on playing a minimalist role as a chairperson of the committee. At the same time, she tries to collect and embrace other people's opinions.



Conclusion

Lawmaker Kim Hyen Mi has grown with the history of Korean politics. Considering Korea's present situation where political parties recruit renowned females to the parties when they need to supplement quotas for female politicians, Kim Hyen Mi's 18-year-old career as a professional politician is worthwhile to notice. She is exceptional in terms of her experience with party politics as well as her knowledge of the media.

Kim Hyen Mi was brought up in a wealthy but conservative family. She learned about democracy and human rights while she was studying at the university. Considering her family background that is dominated by patriarchy and sexism, Kim's unusual interest and the path she has taken to become a politician is exemplary to aspiring female politicians.

Since Korea at large is still under the influence of Confucianism, girls cannot grow up entirely free from the old doctrines. Unlike the usual case, Kim seemed to take positive effects to foster her political orientation from it. Women who obtain good education and opportunities to work where their values their opinions and abilities are recognised have courage to fight absurdity and discrimination in the world.

By challenging a new area, women's right to have their voices heard in various parts of society can be expanded. As the 'first woman college-graduated party executive', Kim Hyen Mi showed the possibility for a woman to become a successful politician once she has exhibited her commitments to other women party executives. Kim Hyen Mi claims that her case would be a good model for women party executives as she witnessed most of the women politicians were identified from outside the party (outsourcing). Kim Hyen Mi was not 'the first woman spokesperson'. In her case, she consolidated her post and opened doors for other female politicians to enter.

Kim Hyen Mi had recognised her present position and planned her future with confidence, faith and with a profound insight on life. Kim Hyen Mi remained firm even when her future did not move forward as she had planned and found what she could do. When she faced the objection of her family against her willingness to work for the labour movement, she put it aside for a while but never gave up. In the same sense, she did not leave politics after she had plunged into it. This is because she had found what she hoped for and she believed that policies could be changed or improved through a change of regime.

Kim Hyen Mi did not display confidence and passion for a change of regime in a loud manner. Whenever her party was in trouble, Kim Hyen Mi displayed her true ability by producing appropriate policies and displaying her savvy abilities. When she won the position as the chairperson of Kyounggido



committee as a first-timer in the Assembly, she felt sorry for missing the gradual steps or learning process to become a good lawmaker. While she is appreciative of the fact that the voters put trust in her, she did not feel it was appropriate to celebrate her immediate success.

Kim Hyen Mi's case and feminism do seem to share common grounds. Kim Hyen Mi appears to put a certain distance between herself and 'feminist activity'. Instead, she believes that she is a beneficiary of feminism arguing that living in Korea as a woman and a female politician in a male-dominated political arena is a form of advancing the feminist movement itself. The reason why Kim Hyen Mi put a distance between herself and feminist activities relates to her thinking that her idea of feminism and her experience with it were rather different. If the term 'feminist activity' is defined as 'a movement or activity associated with women's organisations', Kim Hyen Mi has never been engaged in feminist activity because she does not belong to any women's organisations except the 'Peace-loving Women's Committee.' That engagement was actually on the recommendation of lawmaker Lee Woo Jung when Kim Hyen Mi served as her policy secretary. Kim Hyen Mi views her life as a process of promoting feminist ideals

Kim Hyen Mi's interview was conducted immediately after her party had finished the central committee election. Her top aides were interviewed together, allowing them to express their opinions on the election. Kim seemed to be nervous because it was her first election as a candidate, not a campaign manager. So Kim Hyen Mi's election workers made extra efforts in contacting and canvassing the representatives of the party. Some people from the party said Kim Hyen Mi's campaigning was too excessive and attributed to her winning to the system of four votes per person⁷. But Kim Hyen Mi's top aide claimed that Kim Hyen Mi's reputation and image as a politician was more convincing than the other candidates. Kim Hyen Mi has established her reputation as the one who would stand with the Uri party, remained firm whenever the party was in trouble and in pursuit of progressive politics rather than agreeing to status quo. Her efforts to come up with women's policies are included in her reformative and progressive political principles.

In an election, it is important to identify one's objectives and target voters. In Kim Hyen Mi's case, even though the total number of voters was very small compared to the general election, she was more successful than she had expected because she had delved into issues close to the heart of voters. Kim

⁷ According to "Four votes per one person" system, voters select four people out of all the candidates in order to elect a chairperson of committee. Many various situations can happen in this system. For example, a group of promising candidates including influential ones can emerge as strong contenders. Therefore, a highly-recognised candidate with clear political line may have an advantage in this system.



Hyen Mi revealed she would run in a local constituency next election and utilise similar tactics in campaigning, focusing on her supporters and floating voters. The main strategy is to focus on good politics and not anything else.

This study focuses on how would-be women politicians could learn from the experience of Kim Hyen Mi in establishing election strategies, raising fund and mobilising personnel necessary in election campaign. Furthermore, it highlights how an election and feminist activities are related to each other. In a sense, Kim Hyen Mi's case may not be suitable for the purpose because the election she participated in was at the central committee level, and not a general one. However, since this study comprises the expansion of women's participation, Kim Hyen Mi's case is meaningful because the actions taken by her and her team of assistants can be duplicated by other possible women political aspirants running under similar circumstances.

Lastly, it is noted that the number of women politicians has increased since the 2004 general election. Each of them may have taken different paths to enter the political circles. It is possible to consider that Korea can provide new models for female political participation. Kim Hyen Mi's case is one of them. It provides us with an unlimited imagination, encouraging us to turn the imagination into reality as she has done with her life.

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THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC: TWICE BEATEN THRICE ENERGISED

By Bermet Stakeeva

Toktokan Borombaeva

Introduction

A dramatic decline in women's participation in political processes in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 parliamentary elections has shown the world the vulnerability of women's access to power structures and impermanence of previous gains. Women in Kyrgyzstan, as well as in Asia Pacific, are challenged by existing political structures and patriarchal stereotypes, which hinder women's political participation. Women themselves must and should be important actors in challenging and changing this existing political environment.

This case study is about Toktokan Borombaeva, who was a member of the Kyrgyzstan *Jogorku Kenesh* (National Parliament) for three years. Toktokan is a significant figure in the national women's movement having run as a candidate in the 1995, 2000 and 2005 national elections. In this research, data was gathered on the political, economic and cultural context of Kyrgyzstan, Toktokan's background, and details of her entrance into politics. The data gives a picture of women's access to and their role in political decision-making bodies. Strategies used by Toktokan to advance the cause of women's movement during elections and while in her term in parliament were also collated.

Toktokan's reflections of her experience (both positive and negative) in the electoral struggle, strategies used, relations with the women's movements, organisations and political parties, contributes as a collective political resource to be used both in and outside Kyrgyzstan. This experience is especially valuable for women from countries in transition. This case study also attempts to find out how women in Kyrgyzstan can strengthen their participation in the political processes and how, as parliamentarians, they can assist the women's movement realise their goals.

Identification of restraining forces and driving forces in pre-, during- and post-electoral campaigns; assessment of the strategies used by Toktokan to win and address women's needs in her parliamentary work is also included in



this case study. Additionally, a review of the country's legislation in relation to elections and political processes, as well as social factors that affect women's participation in political processes is integrated in this study.

Kyrgyzstan in transition

Kyrgyzstan, officially known as the Kyrgyz Republic since 1991, is a Central Asian country that is in the process of transition from socialism to capitalism. The Kyrgyzstan government practices a republic form of governance. The Republic has seven *oblasts* (provinces): Chui Oblasty, Jalal Abad Oblasty, Naryn Oblasty, Osh Oblasty, Talas Oblasty, Batken Oblasty and Ysyk-Kol Oblasty. Bishkek, the capital, is situated in the north of the country. Kyrgyzstan gained independence from the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) on 31 August 1991. The Constitution was adopted on 5 May 1993; with amendments adopted in 1994, 1996 (amendment proposed by President Askar Akaev and passed in a national referendum on 10 February 1996 significantly expanding the powers of the President at the expense of the legislature), 1998, and finally in 2003. In 2005 a Constitution Reform Council was formed to review the Constitution. The legal system is based on civil law, with 18 being the age of suffrage.

Executive branch

The head of state is the President (currently Kurmanbek Bakiev who is in office from 15 August 2005 - till next 2010 Presidential elections). The first and sole President for the last 14 years was Askar Akaev (28 October 1991 till official resignation on 4 April 2005). The head of government is the Prime Minister. The President is elected by popular vote for a five-year term and the Prime Minister is appointed by the President and approved by Parliament. From 1991 till 2004 the President, on the recommendation of the Prime Minister, appointed the Cabinet of Ministers. In December 1995, Akaev was re-elected with 75% of total votes. 2005 elections brought Bakiev to the presidency with a landslide victory by winning 85% of total votes counted.

Legislative and Judicial branch

Before 2005 there was a bicameral Supreme Council or *Jogorku Kenesh* (Parliament) consisting of the Assembly of People's Representatives (60 seats where members were elected by popular vote to serve a five-year term) and the Legislative Assembly (45 seats where members were elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms). However, according to the Election Code of 2003, Kyrgyzstan's Parliament had only one chamber after the 2005 parliamentary elections. As a result currently there are 75 members of Parliament in a one-chamber Parliament. The assembly meets twice a year.



The Judicial branch consists of a Supreme Court, Constitutional Court and High Court of Arbitration. In the Supreme Court, the Supreme Council appoints judges for 10-year terms upon recommendations from the President.

History of the electoral system

During the period of independence, Kyrgyzstan passed three forms of Parliament. The first form (1991 till 1995) was the Soviet Councils as the only form through which people exercised State power. These people's councils were the political basis of Kyrgyzstan before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Supreme Soviet (Supreme Council of the Republic) played the role of Parliament. Independent Kyrgyzstan adopted a new Constitution in 1993, which renamed the existing Supreme Council *Jogorku Kenesh* and continued its work as the legislative body of the country. In 2003 the Parliament declared its unicameral status, ending ten years of bicameral Parliament. Further, the 2003 Constitution did not adopt the proportional representative system. Instead, it established a majoritarian one.

The Election Code of 1999 changed both the elections procedures and electoral system. It *liquidated all quotas*, which negatively impacted on women's participation in parliament, since neither female candidates nor voters were ready for this. This resulted in a harsh reduction of women's representation in the Parliament of 1995. Out of 82 female candidates for this election, only five won. In the 2000 elections there was a further decrease in the number of women who ran as candidates and only seven women became members of Parliament: six in the Legislative Assembly and one in the Assembly of Peoples' Representatives. In the Constitution and Election Code amendments prior to 2005, no temporary measures for reaching gender equality were included. During these years Kyrgyzstan has signed and adopted various international documents for gender equality promotion, ratified CEDAW, signed the convention of political rights of women and made official declarations about the State's commitments to women's rights. In spite of these actions, international organisations were noting that the amendments did "meet international standards for elections and political processes".¹

2005 Parliamentary elections description

The unicameral parliamentary elections were held on 27 February 2005, based on the majoritarian electoral system. Members of the 75-seat *Jogorku Kenesh* were elected for a five-year term from 75 single-mandate constituencies from

¹ NDI commentary of proposed changes to legal framework for elections in the Kyrgyz republic. For additional information please look at http://www.ndi.org/NDI/library/1090_kg_electchgs.pdf#search='Parliament, electoral system Kyrgyzstan', p.2.



a population of five million people, of whom 2.6 million were eligible to vote. The political parties that secured seats in the new Parliament were *Alga Kyrgyzstan* (Forward, Kyrgyzstan) –10; *Ata-Jurt* (Fatherland Party) –1; and *Asaba* (Flag Party) –1.

According to the Central Election Commission, the turnout was 57% of eligible voters. Voting did not take place in the Tong district of the Issyk-Kul region because the electoral officials could not deliver ballots due to protests over the barring of an opposition leader. Voting was scheduled to take place in these areas in early March 2005. After the first round of elections, the opposition held demonstrations in central Bishkek and in the south of country to protest against electoral fraud.

Out of all the candidates only 31 received the absolute majority of votes required to be elected. Ten of them were members of the *Alga Kyrgyzstan* party. Two opposition members Muratbek Mukashev of *Ata-Jurt* party and Azimbek Beknazarov of *Asaba* party, both well-known critics of President Akayev, also won seats. Other successful candidates ran as independents although they were known to be pro-government. President Akayev's son, Aydar Akayev, won his seat, while the President's daughter, Bermet Akaeva, had gone through the second round (scheduled for 13 March). She won the elections with huge administrative support and by putting pressure on voters. After the March 2005 revolutionary events, elections results were revised in several districts. Two female members of Parliament lost their cases in court. Later, in the re-elections held in September 2005, the last woman member of Parliament, former President's daughter, Bermet left the Parliament too. Bermet's opponent, a man, won the elections thus resulting in zero women's representation in the Kyrgyz Parliament.

Looking at the *gender aspect*, there is an unprecedented failure of State's gender policy for women's empowerment. This of course was the logical and predicted result from the last changes in legislation. One can argue that the shift from the proportional-majoritarian electoral system to majoritarian may have created more barriers for women's participation in political processes. Besides the decrease in the number of seats in Parliament, heavy competition, lack of financial resources and support provided to women candidates and potential candidates and the absence of quotas were major reasons for the lack of women's representation in the current parliament.

Furthermore, the Election Code denies civil society organisations the right to nominate their representatives. During the last decade when women were already out of official political bodies, it was within the NGOs and other civil society organisations that women could and were applying their leadership capacity and skills. A number of women from NGOs would have run in the 2005 Parliamentary elections if political circumstances were different. NGOs



were not even able to work for female candidates legally. Among registered candidates, there were 427 men and only 41 women. In the first round of elections no woman received the majority of votes. However, in the next round of elections, three women were elected as members of the Parliament. Unfortunately, after the political crisis that occurred on 24 March 2005, all three women lost their seats.

A survey conducted by the National Statistical Committee on the Kyrgyz Republic (published in 1999) reports that 61% of women did not want to work in state or local governing bodies.² Indirectly, this indicates that the majority of women-respondents continue to be discouraged in having a political career. Democracy and equal participation of women in the decision-making process are two sides of one coin. The state data (in regards to gender balance) shows that men dominate all levels of decision-making positions. In comparison to men (67.1%), fewer women (32.9%) hold positions in high offices.³ In autumn of 2005 a new government was formed with only one-woman minister. There were no women out of the seven provincial governors.

Women in Parliament

Historically women in Kyrgyzstan were actively participating in political and social processes. This has been one of the priority issues within the context of gender inequality and imbalance that was addressed at the State level since the 1920s. One measure was the introduction of quotas, which existed till 1999. From 1980 to 1985 women comprised 36.2% of the Supreme Council.

In addressing the issue of Kyrgyzstan's transition from socialism to market economy, Nurgul Djanaeva states that, "the political process of the past has devaluated political rights of people. This political heritage in combination with social disappointment has its own impact. The Communist Party on behalf of the people made all major political decisions in the Soviet Past. During the transition period all political processes have not so far improved the life of people"⁴. In the past few years after the country entered the period of transition, women are facing a lot of challenges one of which is the disempowerment process. Table 1 illustrates the status of women in Parliament using statistical data and analysis.

Table 1: Women in Parliament

² National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (1999) *Women and Men in the Kyrgyz Republic*. Bishkek, p. 66.

³ National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (1999) *Women and Men in the Kyrgyz Republic*. Bishkek, p.59.

⁴ Djanaeva, N. (2002) *Women in Transition*. Bishkek, p. 80.



	2000	2005	2005
Registered candidates	455	427	427
Male	414	386	386
Female	41 (34 ⁵)	41	41
Total seats in Parliament	105: 60 (Legislative Assembly)+ 45 (People's Representatives Assembly)	75	75
Female MPs	7: 6+1	3	0
Percent of women among deputies	6.7	2.25	0
Political system	Majoritarian / Proportional	Majoritarian	Majoritarian

Djanaeva underlines the role of the political system, failure of the State and political parties to implement their commitment to women's empowerment: "There is a contradiction between political announcements and real political practice in relation to women's political participation. This was one of the reasons of the drastic losses of women during the last elections. And this was also a reason why a very small number of women participate in elections as candidates. It is not realised that there is a need in Kyrgyzstan of special programmes at state level to allow women to enter the political arena with equal opportunities and that it is one of the state's international obligations, after it has signed CEDAW, Beijing Platform for Action, etc. Political parties are undermining the role of women. Political leaders are working and thinking from traditional male paradigms and they do not reflect very often".⁶

In 2000, out of the six female deputies of the Legislative Assembly of the National Parliament three were elected from the political party lists. Two of them were elected from the Women's Democratic Party, and one from the Party of Participants of War in Afghanistan and Other Local Conflicts. The other three women were elected from the single-mandate electoral district. The only woman-member of the Peoples' Representative Assembly was elected from a single-mandate district. Professional backgrounds of female members of Parliament were diverse. Among them are teachers, physicians, a businesswoman, a banker, a journalist, a NGO representative and a representative of the trade unions. Two women were elected twice. In the Legislative Assembly of the previous Parliament there were 22 committees,

⁵ Data from Genderstan (2004) Partnership between men and women for gender equality. Bishkek, p. 14

⁶ Djanaeva, N. (2002) *Women in transition*. Bishkek, p. 88-89.



three permanent commissions, and in the Peoples' Representative Assembly there were seven committees, majority of which were headed by men, while only two of them were chaired by women. In reflecting on the national laws of gender equality in decision-making, Djanaeva notes that even though the legal system of the Kyrgyz Republic, including Constitution, does not include open gender discriminatory clauses, it failed to provide and realise political opportunities for women. The low level of women's participation in political processes did become a concern to the government. The State has made efforts to advance women's participation in political processes by adopting several laws regarding women's equality: Law of the Kyrgyz Republic "On the Basics of the State Guarantees of Gender Equality" (adopted by the national Parliament on 31 January 2003) and the Law on Public Administration of 2002.

Although these efforts have not increased women's participation in the political process, both in number or in the terms of meeting women's gender needs, they gradually laid the foundation for public recognition of gender inequality. The foundation includes legal steps toward ensuring women's participation in decision-making. A matrix of measures on the implementation of the National Action Plan for gender equality was developed and adopted. However, this matrix does not include positive measures like quotas or affirmative action for the state institutions or political parties. "Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on the Basics of the State Guarantees of Gender Equality" is regarded as the first serious political step toward gender equality. As a single law it is weak; it does not have punitive mechanisms as part of its enforcement. However, Chapter II of the Law is wholly devoted to guaranteeing gender equality in the State government and civil services. It has declaratory clauses and does not have a concrete measurable target or means of reaching it. Chapter V "Gender Equality Enforcement Mechanism" provides minimal means of enforcing the law. Only once it mentions quota (article 23) - the national Parliament "shall appoint, on consideration of the representation, no more than seventy percent of persons of one and the same sex to offices of" judges of the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, members of the Central Commission on Elections and Referendums, and auditors of the Auditing Chamber of the Kyrgyz Republic. There are no clauses regarding guarantees of women's representation in such political institutions as national or local Parliaments and governments, except a statement that adopts temporal special measures on gender discrimination (Article 6 "Prohibition of Gender Discrimination" of the gender equality law). As a result of very vague and obscure provisions in this law, important documents such as the National Election Code, last amended on 24 January 2004 (which is **after** the adoption of the gender equality law), does not include any special measure to guarantee gender equality in political life. This



fact indicates the weakness of the gender equality law and its minimal impact on women's political rights' realisation.

Thus, despite the declaration of international obligations and conventions in Kyrgyzstan, human rights approach is not realised. Numerous commitments of the State have not been fulfilled and no temporary measures, like quota or affirmative actions were introduced. In other words, CEDAW, BFPA, conventions on political rights and other conventions were not applied in practice.

Political crisis of 24 March 2005

Poverty, corruption and widespread disappointment with 2005 election results led to the activation and consolidation of the opposition, involving an attack on the “White House” leading towards the eventual loss of power by President Akaev. Political participation of the President's family created the feeling of resentment among the people. President Akayev's son, daughter and sisters-in-law ran in the parliamentary elections utilising huge administrative resources to mobilise support for the Akaev's political party “*Alga-Kyrgyzstan*” (led by Akaev's daughter - Bermet Akaeva). In February and March 2005, mass rallies and protests took place in many provinces of Kyrgyzstan. The peak of political turbulence was on 24 March. Destabilisation of social and political life put at risk all previous gains and at the same time gave new opportunities for new political players. Following the events of 24 March, when the opposition took over the government, political parties and civil society organisations started to work on implementing the slogans of democracy. There were major public disputes among members of the Parliament since a majority of the parliamentary seats were still held by Akaev's political party. In those districts where violations of candidates' rights were proven, new members of Parliament got their mandate. The Presidential elections scheduled for July 10, 2005 brought into power a leader of the opposition, Kurmanbek Bakiev. During the elections one of the six candidates was a woman (the only female presidential candidate), Toktaim Umetalieva, who is active in the civil society. She obtained only 0.5 % of the total votes. In the newly formed government, there is only one female minister.

Toktokan Borombaeva - the struggle to go on

Background

Toktokan Borombaeva has been a member of the Legislative Chamber of the Kyrgyz National Parliament from December 2002 till March 2005. She ran for Parliament in 1985, 1995, 2000 and 2005. Toktokan was born on 8 March



1950 in the village of Illiichevka in Uzgen district of Osh Province in a family of farmers. She has attained three higher education degrees: from the School of Physics, Kyrgyz State University; Almaty Institute of Economics; and Prognosis Kyrgyz Agricultural Institute. She grew up in a family of nine children - five girls and four boys. Toktokan was the eldest in the family. Before her, her elder siblings died and her parents prayed that she would survive. If one were to translate her name, it means “Stop.” Her parents wanted God to stop taking another child.

When Toktokan was three years old she lost her mother. Her father remarried. A caring relationship developed between Toktokan and her stepmother and they respected each other. Although Toktokan lived with her parents, it was her paternal grandmother who raised her. Her grandmother was a smart and wise woman. She was from a very prosperous family and had an excellent education. She brought up Toktokan with the best tradition of the southern region of her country. Her grandmother played a significant role in Toktokan’s personal development. Her father worked in the cotton fields and was a collective brigadier. From a very young age, Toktokan knew the meaning of physical labour and her family culture respected all forms of labour. Although her father completed only four years of primary education, he had many opinions on issues and was well read in diverse literature, especially historical stories. It was her father who instilled in Toktokan the love for the history of her people. From early childhood Toktokan heard about female leaders of the Kyrgyz people - Janyl Myrza, Kurmanjan Datkha, and others. He always mentioned Bopo Karimova, who was the head of the city’s Communist Party committee in various districts of the South. Karimova was a bright person, independent in many ways. According to her father strong women are always able to make right decisions and women should be supported in their effort to participate fully within the country’s social and political life. (Here it should be noted that southern provinces are known to be impacted by Islam, thus having a stricter attitude towards women’s participation in social and political processes.)

School years

Toktokan studied well in a school that used Russian as the medium of instruction. In her class she became a leader, actively taking part in all school activities, and often was an initiator of many activities. School teachers supported Toktokan’s ideas. In spite of the fact that many of her classmates wanted to become housewives, Toktokan planned to continue her studies. Traditional attitude in south Kyrgyzstan was to support boys in furthering their education and for girls to marry. But the State was promoting girls’ education in universities. Her family decided to send Toktokan to the capital. Some male family members were skeptical. Toktokan passed successfully all



admission exams and became a student of the School of Physics in the Kyrgyz State University. Gender imbalance in specialisations in science was common - only 30 percent of the students in the School of Physics were female. During her student years Toktokan showed great interest, courage and commitment in struggle for justice and gender equality and the fight against patriarchal attitudes toward women. In Kyrgyzstan there are cases of girls being kidnapped to foster marriages. These marriages without consent have led to many women living in an unhappy environment. When Toktokan heard about girls being kidnapped for marriage, she assisted them in resisting discriminatory social pressures. When one of the students from her faculty was kidnapped, Toktokan organised a team of friends to save her and they succeeded in their effort in spite of the family's resistance. After graduation Toktokan started working as a secondary school teacher in her village despite being offered a job in the capital. At the end of the first work year she received a certificate of honour in recognition for being an excellent teacher and organiser of extracurricular activities.

Marriage and family

Later on Toktokan married a veterinary doctor, Arstanbek Polotov. She fostered good relations with her in-laws. Her father-in-law was actively participating in village governance. As he held a progressive view on women, he became very influential in Toktokan's career. The same support came from her husband also. In fact, Toktokan planned to continue studies in a doctoral programme, but a great opportunity to start her political career changed her life. Her first reaction to an offer to take on a position as second secretary in the district Committee of Communist Union of Youth was rejected by Toktokan. This was interpreted by the State and Communist Party as a result of the family's circumstances. Her husband and parents-in-law were then called to a discussion at the district party office and through joint efforts they finally convinced Toktokan to take the offer.

Professional and political career

Toktokan entered the political arena in 1965. From 1965 till 1973 she was an active member of the Communist Union of Soviet Youth. In the Soviet period in Kyrgyzstan there was only one political party - the Communist Party. After independence, the Kyrgyz people became more involved in forming political parties. In 1974 Toktokan became a candidate of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union till 1999. Toktokan worked as the Secretary of the Uzgen District Committee (1980-1990) and as a vice-chair of the District Council of the People's representatives (1990).



Her job as the Second Secretary of the Uzgen District Committee included supervision of the Party's programmes for youth and children. In this capacity Toktokan showed her leadership skills. In those days any event held by the Communist Party had a higher priority than any other. Toktokan managed to make youth issues in the region a priority issue. An example of her ability is illustrated here. In the district there was one building that served as a venue for all district level events. On one occasion, two events were scheduled at the same time: one organised by the Communist Party and the second by the Youth Communist Union. Toktokan pointed out that the youth group must be given priority. She convinced the State authorities to give the venue to the youth meeting. Of course it was a small change, but it showed the people that committed persons can change the status quo.

In December 1976 Toktokan became the Secretary of the District Committee of the Communist Union of Youth. There was a lot of work to be done. As an experienced professional in corn cultivation, she worked with her team to reach high crop capacities. Her report at the Agricultural Congress was mentioned as one of the best.

The next career step was as head of the Popularisation Department of the District Committee of the Communist Party. At that time there were only two women among such officials in Kyrgyzstan. In 1990 she became the Vice-Chairperson of the District Council of People's Deputies (local parliament). In this position Toktokan was in charge of women's issues in rural economies. Among her achievements was the decision to send a rural woman activist to Moscow to study in the Higher Communist Youth Union's School, one of the Communist Party's most prestigious higher educational institutions, with a lot of international students.

Second, she addressed the issue of women's unemployment. In the Soviet period many young women and girls from Osh province did not continue their studies after graduation from secondary schools. At the same time there were not many job opportunities. This need was addressed at various levels. Under Toktokan's leadership, the District Committee of the Communist Union of Youth initiated a discussion of hiring young women at the Osh textile factory. Once the discussion was concluded, this textile factory hired 80 young women.

Another example of Toktokan's concern with women's issues involved organisational activities such as the organisation of young women's brigades at milk farms. Specifically, these farms were fulfilling the Soviet 5-year plans. South of Kyrgyzstan was specialising in the growth of tobacco where women comprised the highest number of workers in tobacco fields. Tobacco production is hard labour and has a very negative impact on women's reproductive health. In the tobacco industry of Uzgen, workers were working



under undesirable conditions. Toktokan raised these issues and advocated for the protection of their health through provision of milk products, setting up field camps with hot lunches for women, and regular medical examinations.

At the same time, Toktokan was also organising meetings of milkmaids for discussion and finding solutions to problems in cattle-breeding farms. Meetings with the youth groups became a regular part of her activities in order to address issues of violence against women. Invited participants at such meetings were relatives of husbands of participating young women. All these activities were highly welcomed by the government.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Toktokan started working with the Knowledge Society in Osh, educating the local population. Transition from socialism to market economy was difficult, resulting in economic crisis in the whole country. At that time no funding was provided to such institutes. Her leadership capacity and creative approach enabled Toktokan to initiate tuition-based courses of foreign and Kyrgyz languages as well as courses in accounting. After the first appearance of international organisations and donors in Kyrgyzstan, Toktokan started raising funds for women's initiatives and projects. Her first project was the establishment of a sewing shop with financial support from Mercy Corps. In 1995 Toktokan registered an organisation known as "Knowledge Society".

Toktokan worked on women's issues and her political interest and will was exhibited in her membership and her personal activities as a member of political parties. She was concerned that women were only appointed at secondary responsibility levels in all decision-making bodies during the Socialist period despite the usage of slogans about gender equality.

Involvement in Political Parties

Communist Party of the USSR

Active participation in the Youth Union demonstrated her leadership capacity to the political leaders of the Communist Party. She became a visible politically active person. Toktokan had personal interest to work in the political sphere: she liked to work in public, to participate in community discussions and to raise issues that people were concerned about. But, it was not actually her own personal initiative to become a member of the Communist Party. The Province Committee of the Communist Party offered Toktokan membership. According to Party rules, membership was awarded after one year of probation, which she successfully passed. From 1974 to 1999 she was a candidate and member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, during which she held office of the Secretary of the Uzgen District



Committee of the Communist Party and then as a vice-chair of the District Council of the People's Representatives.

The Communist Party was attractive to Toktokan because she shared all the ideas, approaches and ideology of this party. She continued to be a member of the Communist Party even after collapse of the Soviet Union, when the Party lost its pre-eminent position. It was fashionable for former members of the Communist Party after 1991 to make public announcements about decisions to leave Communist Party as a show, indicative of their being democratic. Despite being under social and political pressure, Toktokan did not betray their ideas and values, because she still believed in the communist ideologies. The Communist Party was promoting women's rights, gender equality, brotherhood of all people regardless of class, nationality, religion, or ethnicity.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Toktokan remained as an ordinary member of the Communist Party (1990-1999). Later, Toktokan cooperated with a women's party - Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan Women (1999-2000). She ran for elections under this Party's name and was placed on the party list. She was later nominated by the party to the Parliament. From 2002, Toktokan became the founder and leader of the political party known as "*El Muras*" (People Heritage). Some highlights of the political parties that played a significant role in the latter part of her political career include the following:

a. Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan Women

After joining the Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan Women in 1999, Toktokan became the party's representative when she won the elections in 2000. The goals and objectives of this party are concentrated around social justice and gender equality. The main goal is the activation of citizen's participation in social and political life of the country, wide involvement in governance of State and society, and the increase of their representation in elected bodies.

b. "*El Muras*"

In early 2002, representatives of various NGOs decided to create a political party to promote the realisation of political will. One of the rationales behind this was that the Election Code denied the right of any NGO to nominate a candidate in the national elections. Some NGOs wanted to lobby their ideas through this party.

Thus, "*El Muras*" was born. Toktokan was one of the founders and still remains its leader. Other founders include Lira Tantabaeva and Mairam Tilebalieva, prominent leaders of women's groups. The party's first Congress decided to elect Toktokan as its chairperson. Majority of its members (more



then 6,000 are women) are from NGOs, schools and university teachers. “*El Muras*” goals and objectives are as follows:

‘protection of rights and freedom of people in the republic, development of realistic and socially oriented policy with consideration of country’s current political and economic situation; implementation of its policy through representative and executive bodies of power on the basis of the Constitution; formulation of public opinion in favor of ideas of social justice; political education and upbringing of citizens; attraction of civil society institutes in the preparation to implement the most significant State decisions and programmes; assistance to the process of development of the legal/lawful State, civil society, and assistance to democratic processes; active involvement of citizens to the public life and self-governance processes; and protection of family, motherhood and childhood, of cultural and historic heritage and values in the Kyrgyz Republic’.⁷

The Party sees the main form of participation in the State is through nomination of its candidates for national elections, presidential elections, States positions, and self-governance bodies, and forming fractions in representative bodies. From Toktokan’s view the most important is the principle of democratic unity, self-organisation and solidarity. Political party “*El Muras*” is set up on a territorial basis by organisation of its branches in all administrative districts of Kyrgyzstan. This party requires membership fees. Members of the party tried to address and avoid centralisation and bureaucracy in their work and formulated in their charter that interrelation between party forces is built not on the basis of directives, but on the solidarity and equal responsibility for the common cause. Minority views are respected in decision-making.

Work on women’s issues

Work in the political arena has showed Toktokan that gender is often a restraining factor for women. She experienced difficulties and saw many women being overloaded and not fairly treated not only within family circles but also in social life. She realised that women need more help and lack state and public support. Gender sensitivity grew from her student life, when she came across cases of violence against women. That was one of the factors that impacted Toktokan and made her to work on women’s issues keeping in mind that rural provinces are under patriarchal stereotypes. From the very beginning of her political career Toktokan addressed gender inequality.

⁷ Political party “*El Muras*”, Charter.



Certainly such an active approach was noted by the State and in 1997 they invited Toktokan to join the Osh province state administration. There, she was in charge of the department dealing with women's issues. Soon after that, provincial branches of the State Commission on the Family, Women and Youth Affairs was formed and Toktokan became the chair of the Commission. Because of the low priority of gender equality in the State's agenda, this commission received minimal funding. Toktokan had to rely on her fundraising skills in order to allow her to work for women's advancement at the State level.

The Osh province created centers of women's initiatives called "*Ayalzat*". Later, Toktokan participated in the transformation of these centres into an NGO under the name "*Ayalzat*". Actually "*Ayalzat*" was a programme initiated and administered by the State in its effort to realise the State's commitment to implement BPFA. In all provinces of Kyrgyzstan, the state created NGOs for implementing state programmes and they were known as Centers of Women's Initiatives. As the director of the Osh province centre Toktokan set up a school for women's leadership, gender studies, crisis center, and micro credit line for women. Her work was recognised by the State as the best within the NGO sector and she was awarded with a State certificate of honour and a prize.

Election Challenges and Strategies

Pre-elections: Personal Strategies

Toktokan ran for elections several times. During these campaigns, she gained experience and skills. But, the political and social context differed radically from election to election. For instance, strategies adequate during the Soviet rule did not apply during *perestroika*, or during transition. Unlike the single-party communist system, in the multiparty system, new strategies were needed. Majority and representative electoral systems also have demanded different strategic approaches.

In the 2000 elections, in order to become a candidate, Toktokan used the following two personal strategies: 1) affiliation with a political party; and 2) addressing women's needs and concerns by concentrating on women-constituents and cooperating with women's NGOs.

1) Affiliation with a political party

Previous work in a political party provided Toktokan with political skills and experience. As a result, when considering her strategy in elections, she chose



to affiliate with a political party. Although she had planned to be a candidate for a single member constituency, she chose to become a candidate for the Democracy Party of Women of Kyrgyzstan. The party Coordinator convinced Toktokan that she would be more successful if she affiliated with a party, than if she tried to compete in a single-member constituency. After examining the party's charter and activities, she agreed to cooperate. Toktokan was placed third on the party list.

2) Addressing women's needs and concerns by concentrating on women constituents and cooperating with women's NGOs

Toktokan realised that her previous personal experience of working in women's NGOs may become a strong resource for attracting voters and supporters. She was familiar with women's organisations, worked on women's issues, and knew women's problems in her district. Her programme clearly identified her as a member of the women's movement, as someone striving for gender equality. This programme became one of the campaign's main resources. To identify people's needs and to attract interest in her programme, a sociological survey was held among women and women's NGOs in the district. On the basis of this survey, her electoral programme was formed.

After the Women's Party's congress, Toktokan gathered her colleagues and activists of women's groups to discuss electoral strategies. An electoral campaign office was established, where the most active women from her supporters worked as a team. Key issues that were identified during the survey were analysed and steps to address them were determined. In general, her programme consisted of several parts - political, social, and economic. Special attention was given to the constructiveness of practical activities, and her commitment to the women's movements and to solving gender problems.

Toktokan with her team worked on the following electoral campaigning components. This involved first identifying women as her main audience, focusing on their needs, and developing a programme, image, and electoral materials in accordance. Next, she and her team disseminated her programme, and began fundraising and campaigning, through visual agitation and leaflets; "door to door" campaigning; team-building; coalition creation; work with focus-groups during campaign preparation and realisation; and advertising and publicising (television, newspapers, and other media formats).

a. Visual agitation and leaflets



Visual agitation and leaflets were made on the basis of her programme. Leaflets were used to state the main points of her platform, and were distributed among target groups - members of women's organisations and their partners, who included women homemakers. Surveys revealed that visual agitation elicited significant interest among the populace. Administrative resources of one of the candidates were used to prepare visual materials and access to one of the best printing houses was granted. As well as the party's posters, Toktokan also issued her own leaflets, with her picture and a slogan that made her recognisable among other candidates. The main slogan of the electoral campaign was "Vote for Women's Party."

b. "Door to door" campaign

In the beginning of her election campaign, Toktokan held a meeting with leaders of women NGOs. She introduced her programme and platform. Representatives of women organisations expressed their recommendations about improving her programme. Toktokan used women NGO's potential for oral agitation and distribution of informational materials by the "door to door" method. This method gave her the opportunity to cover most of her constituency. Out of 60,000 voters in her district, her team members visited approximately 30,000 out of which 52 percent were women. Individual contact between a candidate and voter proved important. And, the mobilisation of women's organisations played a crucial role in the efficiency of this method.

c. Team building

An important factor in a candidate's success is the selection and inclusion of empowered persons. Toktokan invited women, respected among her constituents, to join her campaign. One such person was a well-known regional party leader, B. Karimova. She presented Toktokan's programme during meetings with constituencies, and also answered questions. Her participation in the electoral campaign noticeably influenced Toktokan's popularity. Toktokan facilitated the activities of team members through trainings.

d. Coalition creation

Toktokan and two candidates from the Women's Party founded a coalition to promote their candidacies. They jointly worked out a general strategic plan, with tactics and actions. Toktokan took part in meetings with constituencies not only in her own district, but also in other candidates' districts. For constituents, this was a sign of unity among candidates of the same party, eliciting some supplementary votes. For collaborative efforts, coalition members monitored and worked out recommendations for improving



contact with constituents. Toktokan initiated the holding of informal meetings among women candidates, to strengthen relations and exchange information and experiences. This also assisted the promotion of candidates from the Women's Party.

e. Work with focus-groups during campaign preparation and realisation

Toktokan's team focused on the following: rural women activists; members of women organisations; women NGOs and their partners; and homemakers. Led by Toktokan, extra human resources were engaged from among women's organisations to work with focus groups. All work with focus groups involved explanatory sessions on the campaign and elections.

f. Mass media

Toktokan utilised the television and the printed media as vehicles for advancing her campaign. In the framework of election campaign, the government provided airtime for all candidates. Toktokan participated in television debates and roundtable discussions. With the help of party and administrative resources, candidates were able to present their election programmes in separate telecasts. Toktokan used the so-called method of "final rush." That is, her programme during the final days of the election campaign. This method enabled her to heighten interest and awareness among constituents. As for the printed media, Toktokan printed her platform in regional and district newspapers. During all campaigns, she regularly published her articles about vital themes.

Driving factors

Many factors encouraged Toktokan to run for elections. And, despite numerous obstacles, she became a member of Parliament. Her significant experience of working in various leadership and power positions built strong personal political confidence. She gained skills for working and negotiating with male politicians and male voters, and her capacity to deal with state representatives also helped in electoral campaign. Because of her links to the government, she was able to garner administrative support. This is extremely helpful in countries with powerful administrations. The Party chair was a well-known figure in the State administration. The State was able to provide venues, cars, telephones and human resources for Toktokan's campaign, for meeting with voters, for communication, and for disseminating resources. Cheap rates for printing electoral materials were also helpful.

Previous experience of running for elections gave Toktokan not only better electoral skills. She had not won all of her previous elections, but in the process, she had become a more experienced and a wiser political fighter.



Experience working in and with women's NGOs helped Toktokan to understand and relate to local women's concerns, and to voice them, at the same time developing close relations with local women and garnering their support. The capacity of the women's movement of Kyrgyzstan is considerably strong, and the efforts of women's organisations have brought about numerous positive results. These results in turn have encouraged the development of more women's organisations, and have helped women in general. But, regardless, the number of truly active NGOs remains low. During elections, NGOs mobilised their human resources and partners, but most NGOs have minimal experience with such efforts, particularly in providing support to women candidates. Unquestionably, it takes time and effort to acquire such knowledge and skills. During the 2000 elections, women's organisations did not play any significant role, as they did not in the 2005 campaign. Assistance from women's organisations certainly helped Toktokan, but this assistance was minimal, due to limited capacity.

Knowledge of female voters' problems in the district has assisted Toktokan and her team to address their needs directly, and to build her programme in accordance. Toktokan had lived in the province, where she ran for elections. She knew the critical issues facing women well: violence, poverty, unemployment, challenges of life in rural areas, and pressures from patriarchal norms. As discussed, she had significant experience addressing these issues, working both with the State and with society. As a result, she garnered a high number of votes. In fact, the Women's Democratic Party received most of the votes in her district, because of her positive image. Moreover, people voted along party lists and recognising names along the list guaranteed votes for her, as she has been a particularly prominent figure.

Many factors stimulated Toktokan to run for Parliament. Her struggles and successes encouraged her to register again as a candidate in 2005. Her will to run for Parliamentary elections was based not only on her desire to change society for the better and her love of politics, but also her intent to apply her collective knowledge and capacity. Among the factors driving Toktokan to participate in Parliament has been family support and encouragement. According to her husband, an active woman who wishes to make a career in politics should have the support of her family. Her immediate family played an important role in elaborating her election programme and platform, and they also mobilised more distant relatives and their friends, neighbours, and colleagues to support Toktokan.

Support from the leadership of the Women's Party provoked Toktokan to run for office. She had not been a member of the party, but agreed with and shared many of the party's principles and activities. The party's political council actively participated in elaborating the strategy and tactics for the



election campaign, mobilising and uniting coalitions. Of particular importance was the administrative resource offered by the party, for meetings with constituencies. The leader of the party had powerful allies among high-ranking officials that enabled her to use administrative resources - for instance, cars were available for meetings with constituents, making campaigning in general much easier. Interested in party members' progress, State officials also supported Toktokan and her team by organising mass meetings, and mobilising additional human resources to promote candidates' programmes.

The 2000 elections were held under the majoritarian/proportional system. The proportional electoral system has proven to be friendlier to women than the majoritarian system. This became clear in the 2005 elections, when Kyrgyzstan shifted to a majoritarian system and when actually all female candidates lost the much-needed victory. Indeed, one of the most important factors contributing to the success of women candidates was their inclusion in party lists. The party list system allowed for struggle for the maximum of amount of places in Parliament. Parties made lists out of the strongest candidates. The Women's Party list helped Toktokan to become a member of Parliament in 2000.

Restraining factors

Women of Kyrgyzstan face many restraining factors when entering or acting in the political arena. Social norms, customs and perceptions of traditional or religious practices play significant roles in opening or closing the doors to politics. In Kyrgyzstan, a low level of women in high offices has reinforced patriarchal prejudices against women politicians. Male chauvinism has led to the elimination of quotas for women. Although women have equal voting rights, in rural areas or villages many women do not enjoy these rights fully. Rather, male family members dominate family decision-making. Considering that the majority of citizens of Kyrgyzstan live in rural areas, this has serious repercussions for women in politics - when exercising their voting rights, or actively participating in politics. In general, the burden of poverty and domestic labour, the lack of possibility to gain leadership skills and experience, and the absence of special programmes for women's advancement in politics all weaken possibilities for women to pursue political careers.

There are no positive measures - like quotas - to strengthen women's participation in politics in Kyrgyzstan. This reverberates negatively on gender equality, as women are essentially excluded from politics in general and from State offices. This is true, despite the State's commitment to improve the status of women, as reflected in their adherence to the Beijing Platform for



Action. The absence of such measures is a major obstacle to improvement of women's potential.

In spite of numerous and diverse women organisations, the population in general knows little about women's NGOs or their activities. The media pays little attention to these organisations - or to women or gender issues. As a result, the idea of a woman participating in government is not taken seriously.

Patriarchal stereotypes are strong restraining factors on women entering the realm of decision-making at higher levels in Kyrgyzstan. Men and women alike tend to consider men to be the only realistic candidates or political actors. Surveys have indicated that both women and men tend to vote for men. Social attitudes, and especially in rural areas, give political preference to men. In light of the absence of state's programmes or positive measures in support of women and possible female political leaders (quotas, affirmative actions and specialised training for female candidates), overcoming social stereotypes is a huge barrier for women to overcome. Kinship relations also impact women's political participation negatively. Community's support to male candidates is much stronger in comparison to female ones, considering pervasiveness of patriarchal norms and the degree to which men and boys are privileged, particularly in public life. During elections, women often defer to their husbands or male relatives.

During interviews, participants at various conferences on women's participation in political processes stressed lack of financial resources as one of the big restraining factors. Women might use party funds, but these resources are typically limited. More often, women must draw on their own financial resources. Businesses rarely support parties, and particularly women candidates. The lack of money invested in elections has led to limited media coverage. Finally, to participate in elections, candidates must submit an electoral deposit in the State Bank. In 2000, this deposit for parliamentary elections was in the amount of 5000 soms, whereas that year the minimal salary was 300 soms. In 2005 this deposit was 30000 soms, equal to US\$ 600. The electoral campaign cost is much more than what women can afford.

Journalists were practically all gender insensitive. Publicity of gender equality by means of mass media is not enough because of journalist's gender insensitivity. Moreover, women organisation's reluctantly assist with mass media. Television also doesn't promote stories on women's issues. Few telecasts, few journal and newspaper articles give voters a model of a woman politician or a woman leader. Even during the elections mass media do not pay attention to women candidates. This is especially true in rural areas.

In the past decade Kyrgyzstan has brought a number of changes, which influenced rather negatively the position of women in the country's government. Electoral system, rules and procedures were limiting women's



chances to win. For example, in 1995 a new “Elections Code” was adopted and, accordingly, the election procedure was changed. Considering the reduction of women in elected positions in the state after using this new Code, it appears that neither the electorate, nor women candidates were prepared for such a downturn.

Post-electoral strategies

When she became a deputy, Toktokan developed a plan to promote women’s issues in the Parliament. The main point of the plan was to lobby for gender laws. Previously, Toktokan had led a series of meetings with women’s organisations to discuss laws on gender equality. Bringing forth additions and changes requested by women’s NGOs to this draft law, Toktokan initiated a review of the law in a session of the Parliament. The “Law on the Basics of the State Guarantees of Gender Equality” was accepted. As well, Toktokan brought forth additions and changes to the Family Law, “Law on Violence,” and others.

The main point of the strategy was to get and use connections with women’s organisations. Women’s NGOs proposed a diverse draft law connected with women’s problems. Discussions of these draft laws with women’s NGOs allowed Tokotokan to bring forth specific additions in accepted laws. With several women’s organisations, Toktokan participated in the creation of an alternate review of CEDAW, which was presented to the Committee on the Status of Women in New York.

Constant connection with international organisations that work in the field of promoting gender equality gave the possibility to take effectively international experience into parliamentary practice. With the help of these organisations, Toktokan led several roundtables with the participation of deputies, representatives of government bodies, and women’s NGOs to discuss the promotion of gender equality. Toktokan received high ratings from international organisations for promoting women’s questions in Parliament. In her work, Toktokan continued to attract attention of the Krygyz people to women’s problems through mass media. Regular publication in periodicals received definite resonance among the people.

It is important to note what post-elections strategies worked for the success of promoting women’s agenda at the state level. Toktokan used her existing links and also formed new linkages with women’s groups. In spite of her efforts to do so, not much was reached for consolidated impact on Parliamentary decisions. For example, the election code did not reflect women’s appeal on quotas. It is due to the limited experience of women’s groups, lack of consolidation of women’s groups on a political platform. Strategy to unite female members of the Parliament to form a women’s



caucus to focus on women's issues didn't work. Probably it happened because majority of female members of Parliament were not linked to the women's movement.

Engendering parliamentary agenda was the other strategy to mainstream women's issues. This was difficult to use effectively because of very few women in the Parliament and lack of women's caucus. Resistance to put women's issues on the parliamentary agenda was rooted in male perception of gender equality as a not serious problem; lack of members of Parliament capacity to see gender equality as a crosscutting issue. Despite this patriarchal resistance, Toktokan made women's issues visible and successfully lobbied several laws specifically addressing women's needs. Connection to international gender-sensitive groups was also a way to attract attention to women's challenges in Kyrgyzstan and to raise funds.

Our analysis shows that she was in fact the only member of Parliament who was constantly raising women's issues and concerns. This fact is definitely related to her previous engagement with women's organisations as well as previous long-term involvement in programmes addressing women's needs. In the Parliament where Toktokan served there were five other women, who were much less gender equality oriented. It shows the need for women's movement to work with female candidates prior to elections and the role of women's NGOs in raising gender consciousness and impacting on high level decision-making in the country.

Conclusion

Toktokan believes that Kyrgyzstan was on the path of democratic transformation since 1991. People had high hopes that the republic will prosper. But starting from 2000 the situation changed and regressed. Increased shadow (black/grey market) economy activities, the revision of human resources policy, frequent changes of heads of many state institutes (ministers, state agencies head, etc.), and growing corruption were the indicators of the regressive movement within the society. This led to people's impoverishment and obvious social stratification. Toktokan realises this. Through her work she made efforts to attract state attention to gender equality issues. Working in the state department and with women's groups Toktokan was raising concerns on violence against women, girls education, impact of religious stereotypes as well as patriarchal norms that were especially strong in South Kyrgyzstan, where she lived and worked. Her communist past permitted her to see the new danger of the growing influence of religion. She played a major role as a trainer among women of South Kyrgyzstan. Acting as a leader Toktokan was breaking political stereotypes on the role of women in society.



Women's political participation in Kyrgyzstan is challenged in many ways. But, despite these restraining forces, women do work and new forms, ways and strategies of increasing women's participation are seen in the new context of transitional process.

1. Legalisation of women's political rights is not enough.
2. Women's organisation should assist in women's struggle for political seats.
3. It is in women's, men's and the State's agenda to foster inclusive models of development.
4. Without women's struggle it will take a very long time to have women's issues addressed and women's interests taken into serious consideration.
5. One of the main tactical questions is whether to use men's strategies or not.
6. Priorities for women's success are:
 - Addressing political barriers (non-friendly electoral system, lack of gender sensitivity of political parties, etc.);
 - Change social consciousness (voters' attitude, patriarchal stereotypes, etc.);
 - Involve more women's groups as participants during electoral process; and
 - Mainstream women's concerns into State's and civil society's agenda.

Toktokan Borombaeva has worked successfully for women's agenda. She has been promoting several laws that are aimed at the protection and advancement of women: laws on domestic violence and on state guarantees on gender equality. She has chosen to struggle for women's needs in the Parliament and many members of Parliament were telling that her name is associated with the word "gender". She has been working to improve legislation, to change male atmosphere of the Parliament, to include gender in meeting agendas, to bridge and link women's groups' messages to the *Jogorku Kenesh* (for example, gender issues into hearing on state budget), to change public stereotypes and cooperation with male colleagues. Her experience can be viewed as an enormous lesson in the effort to increase women's participation in politics.



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MALAYSIA: TRANSFORMATIVE NOT ALTERNATIVE

By Saliha Hassan



Zaitun Mohamed Kasim

Introduction

Malaysia's international reputation has been built traditionally upon the image of 'ethnic harmony' until the recent shift to a 'moderate Islamic state',¹ which is now being popularised by the incumbent ruling party as *Islam Hadhari*. Basically it means Malaysia is majority Muslim country pursuing moderate, progressive, non-militant and development focused policies towards a vision of a democratic, developed and open society. In the 1990s, Malaysia had undergone a period of economic success that have witnessed multi-faceted developments, not least the obvious increase in educated professional women. This has been responsible for their higher sense of efficacy in terms of involving themselves in public life and their increased ability to maximise opportunities offered by the fast paced development of Malaysian economy. The achievements of Malaysian women in the public sphere have been fairly-well documented under the Publications Sub-committee of the National Preparatory Committee for the Beijing Conference on Women, 1995.² The Malaysian government had formally adopted the National Policy for Women (NPW) at the end of 1989 which was to provide "guidelines and recommendations to the Government on how full and active participation of

¹ Ethnicity and Islam are the two givens that pervade practically all aspects of Malaysian life. Malays who mainly make up the the Bumiputra ethnic category are Muslims and claim historical political legitimacy to be first among equals. Hence, the continuity of the institution of the Malay sultanates, the special position of the Bumiputras in all government policies, Malay as the national language, Islam as the official religion and Malay culture and persona as the foundation of Malaysian national identity. The other major ethnic groups are Chinese and Indians while, Kadazans, Ibans and other indigenous groups are categorised together with the Malays as Bumiputras.

² The National Advisory Council on the Integration of Women and Development (NACIWID) proposed the idea of the publication, the Women's Affairs Division (Bahagian Hal Ehwal Wanita, HAWA), Ministry of National Unity and Social Development funded the project and Syamala Nagaraj of Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, "encapsulated the varied panorama of Malaysian women" (Nagaraj 1995).



women in development can be achieved” while its primary objectives are stated as (Nagaraj: 1995 14-15):

- a. to ensure equality in obtaining resources, information, opportunities in participation and development for both men and women. Equality objectives and equity must be based on development policy that is people-oriented, so that women (whose composition is about half of the total population) can contribute and achieve their highest potentials; and
- b. to integrate women in all sectors of national development in line with the ability and needs of women to improve the quality of life, eradicate poverty, abolish ignorance, illiteracy and to achieve a peaceful, prosperous and happy nation.

Since then, women’s achievements and contributions in Malaysia have been given fairly constant media coverage and public recognition by government, political and private sectors. However, the consensus is that Malaysian women still have a long way to go. Specific to the political arena, for example, since the country’s first federal election in 1955, the percentage of female elected representatives in Parliament had been an average of 5.07%. In 1990, the percentage was 6.11 and increased to 10.4% in 1999. The result of the 1999 general election allowed Malaysia to boast of a significant increase from 7.8% after the 1995 general election. However, it was still below the then Asian countries’ average of 14.1% with Vietnam reportedly having the highest percentage of women MPs in an Asian country with 26%. The result of the 2004 general election for the Malaysian legislative assembly, the *Dewan Rakyat* or the lower house of Malaysia’s bicameral parliament system, did not change the percentage much at 10.5%. In fact, with the increase in the number of parliamentary constituencies due to re-delineation exercises prior to 1999 and 2004 elections, the ratio of men to women members of parliament had gone down to a record low of 9:1 (Table 1).



Table 1: % of women in the Malaysian Parliament, the *Dewan Rakyat*

ELECTION YEAR	TOTAL SEATS	RATIO MEN: WOMEN	%
1955	53	51 : 1	2.00
1959	104	34 : 1	2.90
1964	104	34 : 1	2.90
1969	144	71 : 1	1.38
1974	154	30 : 1	3.25
1978	154	21 : 1	4.54
1982	154	18 : 1	5.19
1986	177	24 : 1	3.95
1990	180	15 : 1	6.11
1995	192	12 : 1	7.80
1999	193	9 : 1	10.4
2004	219	9 : 1	10.5

Sources: Rashila (2005: 217), Khoo B.T. (2005: 44)

Political setup

Against this background, Malaysian women are further defined by a general Asian gender construction that translates into complex religious, cultural, economic, social and political constraints and challenges in the context of their meaningful participation in the public sphere. These are even more pronounced for women politicians who believe that they can be of greater service to Malaysia if they are elected to the nation's legislative body.³ Some popular observations that have been made on Malaysian politics in this respect are that *firstly*, women form at least half of Malaysia's population and work force; *secondly*, women are politically conscious and motivated. This is amply substantiated by the fact that more Malaysian women than men take

³ Election to this august body has been regularly held once every five years as stipulated in the nation's Constitution. Although Malaysia has a multi-party system, the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) has continued to dominate the political scene. BN is a coalition of 14 political parties having one dominant coalition partner, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). It was formed in 1974. However, before 1974 it was a coalition of just three of the currently senior coalition members, namely UMNO, Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and the coalition was known as the Alliance Party or *Parti Perikatan*. Parti Perikatan was formed in conjunction with the country's first federal election under the guidance of the British administration, in 1955. After the country gained independence from the British in 1957, the first general election held as a sovereign democratic nation was in 1959.



the trouble to register as voters, and more women than men turn out to cast their ballots. However, *thirdly*, women have not been selected as candidates in equal proportions or given cabinet positions likewise. Making up not less than 54% of the population, Malaysian women are decidedly under-represented. This, despite the Malaysian government's pronouncement that it is committed to promote women's equality by agreeing to the commitments set forth in the Beijing Platform for Action at the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women - to enhance the national machinery for women's advancement, increase women's participation in decision-making, safeguard women's rights to health, education and social well being, and remove legal obstacles and gender discriminatory practices.

In the last recent general elections, for example, there has been no lack of potential women candidates in all the political parties, of which the main ones were the Barisan Nasional (BN), Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), Parti Keadilan Nasional (KeADILan) and Democratic Action Party (DAP). DAP, with its ideology of social democracy and concept of Malaysian Malaysia (as opposed to Malay-based Malaysia that is the mainstream position), has maintained the best record among the parties in terms of fielding women candidates. The government party, BN, has always approached the seat allocation exercise from a win-win calculation both at the polls and within its coalition structure. It has maintained an increasing number of seat allocations for their women's wings which is also paralleled by increase in parliamentary seats achieved through governmental act of delineation of constituencies by the Election Commission. PAS, led by its *ulama* leadership, had for decades refused to allow its women to contest in the country's elections on the grounds that the existing practices in election campaigns threaten their personal safety and dignity and that the social responsibilities expected by constituencies of their *wakil rakyat* (elected representatives) are not for women. On the other hand, its Dewan Muslimat has maintained that they have been ready to field their candidates since the 1990 election and they did convince the party leadership to allow them to contest in a few constituencies in the 2004 general elections.

As such, it is a particularly daunting task to operationalise possible strategies for women candidates at the elections due to the complexity of the multi-ethnic population make up and the heterogeneity of religious orthodoxies, traditional values, political ideals, economic strengths, ethnic loyalties and demands of modern day living that come with it. For the Malaysian women, therefore, the challenges, constraints and opportunities to their participation in the process of winning seats in the country's legislature are a complex tapestry of these factors. For them, these factors can exist in any different combination. Thus, choosing and implementing strategies become a creative challenge. With these considerations in mind, a single case study may not allow a credible generalisation for the Malaysian situation. However, Zaitun



Mohamed Kasim's experiences as an independent woman candidate in the 1999 Malaysian general election may best provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved.

Zaitun Mohamed Kasim⁴

Zaitun Mohamed Kasim, or Toni as she is often popularly known as, is currently active in organising professional trainings on gender and sexuality issues, human rights, and women's rights for a range of community groups, for UN-sponsored programmes and for regional organisations. For Zaitun, all issues, from detention without trial or deaths in custody to rape and domestic violence to any humanitarian problems, all merit the same attention. She had also participated in fact-finding missions, worked at the regional level on advocacy as well as facilitating different groups in strategic planning for policy advancements in those areas that she is an advocate of. In 1999, Zaitun ran in the Malaysian general election as a parliamentary candidate aiming not primarily for a place in the country's highest legislative body, but to sound a wake up call to Malaysia on the critical need for a change in cultural perception of women's participation in politics. In Zaitun's words, "Given the realities of politics in Malaysia, we knew that it would have been a miracle to win. Our minimum was to make a splash on women's issues - to get a seat would have been the cream on the top of the cake - but our minimum was that we would sound the wake up call..."

Further, they also wanted to force other women to face up to the fact that women as politically efficacious individuals are able to initiate making the difference; to showcase the reality that it is possible to rise above partisan party politics by centering on societal issues that cut across heterogeneous Malaysian identities; and that by example, to prove that politics need not to be a dirty game as commonly assumed and accepted; and, above all, to recognise that the political participation of women at every level of decision-making is vital to advance and uphold the rights of women as well as to better represent their concerns. These were the principles and ideals on which WCI was founded.⁵ On the personal level, Zaitun's direct political participation has made her one of the most prominent women social activists who has sought to make inroad into partisan Malaysian politics on an independent platform by centering women's issues and amplifying public's concerns such as the environment and good governance. "This is what I am most passionate about and what I live for", Zaitun says.

⁴ This section on Zaitun is based on a series of interviews with Zaitun Kasim (July 2005), and Zaitun (2004).

⁵ Interview with Saira Shameem on 21-08-2005 who also kindly made available her personal file on WCI.



Biography

Zaitun was born on 31st December 1966 in the city of Ipoh, which is the administrative capital of one of the best developed states in Malaysia, Perak. She enjoyed the advantages of an urban middle class upbringing although her father died while she was young. Her father, a bank employee, died when he was 47 years old. Zaitun was later told by one of her late father's friends that her father was a member of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) on whose ticket she made her 1999 debut as an independent woman candidate.⁶ Her mother was a nurse. She quit her nursing job to care for her three children. From then on she looked after them, and occasionally there was the family *kedai kopi* (coffee stall) which she managed, and later the small bookshop - "my mother was an avid reader", Zaitun reminisced. From her Zaitun inherited family and humanitarian values while from both she learnt to be articulate and brave about her thoughts and opinions, sensitivity to her social environment and to develop public self-confidence. She had been previously married to an Australian and they had no children. She is currently occupied as a freelance trainer and facilitator in gender and human rights training programmes.

Her primary education in was in the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Ipoh. Her secondary education was at the Main Convent, Malacca, the historical city that is also the administrative capital of Malacca state, the seat of the Malay Muslim Malacca sultanate that reigned supreme over the Malay Archipelago in the 15th century. In Malaysian education history, convent schools have been acknowledged as well-administered and with a high standard of education. After that she went back to Ipoh where she did her pre-university or matriculation course briefly at a government school, the Pusat Sains Matrikulasi, but she said "they were driving her bananas" and moved to a private college, the Kolej Sri Inai, before she left for Australia to continue with her university education in 1985. She graduated in 1988 with a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Economics and Computer Studies from Flinders University, Australia. By Malaysian standards her education route was a privileged one and has given her a good foundation in terms of academic achievement, service to society and social responsibility.

Her sojourn in Australia was a defining period in two areas of her life. *First* is in her personal development. Used to the racist undertone of Malaysia's social interactions whereby she was always made to feel inadequate, awkward and self-conscious about her Indian Muslim identity, in her new environment she was appreciated for her candid independent opinions and her dark beauty,

⁶ Zaitun says, her father was certainly very partial to DAP politics and had intended to run on a DAP ticket at one stage.



smouldering brown eyes and thick jet black curly locks. She was admired for her articulate presentation, her reasoned and well-thought out opinions - traits which back home were generally considered unbecoming in a young woman. Whole new possibilities were opened up to her in terms of her self confidence to do her bits for causes beyond her university degree. *Second* is in her social activism. It was at Flinders that she started to volunteer for Community Aid Abroad (CAA), an Australian grassroots-development aid organisation that aimed at poverty eradication and strengthening civil society. After her graduation she worked for six years with CAA - “it was here that I learnt to recognise that social justice is not just about resources but the right to be able to access those resources” (Indramalar 2005).

Her formal education has been enriched by numerous other short courses and trainings, such as the Training Workshop for Trainers in Women, Gender and Development at Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), Amsterdam in June 1998; the Gender and Organisational Development that was organised by HIVOS (Netherlands) and Cenwor (Sri Lanka) in Sri Lanka in February 1999; and the Training for Senior Human Rights Trainers that was organised by Forum Asia (Thailand) in Bangkok in March 2003. Courses such as these have built her skills in conducting trainings at local, regional and international levels. Highlights of her curriculum vitae list a wide range of training, facilitation and research programmes that she conducts both in paid and voluntary capacities. In March and May 2005, Zaitun was employed by Asia Foundation as facilitator and resource person on behalf of Sisters in Islam for its South Asian Community Leaders Training-Construction of Sharia Laws in Malaysia. Participants were scholars, journalists and religious leaders from South Asia and Afghanistan. Earlier in October 2004, Zaitun was employed in the same capacity by Women Living Under Muslim Laws to conduct training on gender and the construction of Sharia Laws for women activists from Francophone West Africa under the organisation’s programme, Training for Francophone Africa Muslim Women Activists, Mali. In June-July 2005, Zaitun was employed by the International Institute for The Study of Islam In the Modern World (ISIM), Leiden University, Netherlands, as its lead trainer and member of the planning committee for human rights advocates from Yemen, Tanzania and Southeast Asia on Islam and women’s rights participating in its Rights At Home Advanced training project. Most recently, she has also done some work on skills required for community organising and rebuilding with Achenese women who have been affected by military operations as well as the Tsunami. The list goes on . . .

Zaitun’s employers include a wide range of organisations, namely the International Labour Organisation ILO-ROAP, Sisters In Islam, Malaysian AIDS Council, All Women’s Action Society, Community Aid Abroad (now Oxfam Australia) and Committee for Asian Women (Regional Network on



Women Workers). She has done training and consultancies on social activism, reproductive and sexuality health and rights, gender and sexuality, gender-based violence, sexual harassment at work, gender awareness and related topics for the Asia Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women, Amnesty International, Malaysian National Union of Journalists, Pesticides Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN-AP), the Asia South Pacific Bureau on Adult Education (ASPBAE) and the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD).

Zaitun has, as well, presented papers and been published on topics related to her professional areas of focus: gender and sexuality, Islam, gender and human rights, capability building (training of trainers), organisational development, and social justice issues with emphasis on poverty and civil political rights. These include “Sexuality Under Attack: The Political Discourse on Sexuality in Malaysia” (2004), “Presentation on Participation in Political and Public life: The Experience of Running as an Independent Women’s Candidate” (2004), and “The Experience of the Women’s Candidacy Initiative in the 1999 Malaysian General Elections: Insights from a Unique Political Initiative” (2001).

Particularly significant among what she considers as her achievements was when she conducted a speaking tour in Australia on behalf of SUARAM on the impact of the Internal Security Act on the state of human rights in Malaysia. This tour included a briefing at Parliament House to a group of Parliamentarians (2003). She was also invited by the South Australian Government as a speaker at the Adelaide Festival of Ideas (2001). Earlier, in December 1999, Zaitun was named by journalist Reena Gurbaksh, writing in *The Star*, a leading Malaysian English daily as one of most significant women of 1999.⁷

Social Activism

Upon her return to Malaysia from Australia, Zaitun worked for a short stint on local government issues with UNDP in Kuala Lumpur. She then joined the All Women’s Action Society, Malaysia (AWAM) where she served until 2000 when her foray into the nation’s 1999 election process somehow had proved to be a liability of a sort to AWAM. Until then she served as vice-president of and key spokesperson for AWAM. While in AWAM, Zaitun honed her interest in women as well as environmental issues. She was also a member of the Sisters In Islam (SIS) since 1996 and is SIS’s chief trainer on

⁷ The others were Sophie Rhys-Jones, Hillary Clinton, Cherry Blair, Jennifer Lopez, Coco Lee, Linor Abargil, Steffi Graf, Datin Seri Wan Azizah Ismail, Sheila Majid, Sharma Shukla, Siti Nurhaliza, Deanna Yusoff, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, Betty Chew, and Datuk Ng Yen Yen (Gurbaksh 1999: 9).



democracy, gender and Page: 99
rights of Muslim women in Sharia laws.⁸ In 1999 she joined as a human rights activist Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM) and is now on its Board of Directors. In 2000 she joined the Malaysian Amnesty International local chapter.⁹

Besides her professional services in those social issue areas close to her heart, Zaitun has also served in a voluntary capacity with the Southeast Asia Committee on Advocacy (SEACA), Sisters In Islam, Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), Amnesty International Malaysia, Freedom Film Festival 2004 and Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI). Zaitun was appointed member of NGO fact-finding missions to investigate impact of relocation on indigenous communities in Bakun, in the state of Sarawak, and impact of the deadly Nipah Virus in pig farms in Bukit Pelanduk, in the state of Negeri Sembilan. In 1996 Zaitun co-wrote an article on "Gender and Transport" with Paul A. Barter and she was one of the founding members of a fledgling group called Forum for Equitable and Environment-Friendly Transport (FEET).

By the time of her candidacy, Zaitun's blurb said that she had a total of ten years experience in social movements for poverty eradication, women's issues, human rights and sustainable development. She has also been involved in disabled people's issues and environmental issues including sustainable transportation.

Political Will

Zaitun describes her journey from social activism to political involvement, namely her participation in the election process as "reluctantly but inevitable". Her reluctance seemed to be due to a mixture of personal doubts of her own efficacy as a politician, the daunting challenge of money, machinery and manpower to launch and sustain an election campaign without a party organisation, and the acute debate of the perceived boundaries between civil society and partisan politics. However, it seemed to Zaitun that it was inevitable, given the marginalisation of civil society activism in general and women's voice in particular in the policy-making process of the country without its direct participation in the relevant policy-making bodies.

⁸ She was invited in by one of SIS's founder members, Salbiah (interview with Zaitun Kasim, 22-07-2005).

⁹ It is yet to be officially recognised by the Malaysian government.



Her final decision, it seemed, was neither made based on speculative soul searching alone nor on an impulse. She was inspired, walked through and backed up by Saira Shameem¹⁰, Zaitun said

“I remember the knot in my stomach the day I actually said yes to being fielded by the Women’s Candidacy Initiative (WCI) as ‘the first independent women’s candidate running on a women’s platform’. It was a manageable knot though, only because the person trying to convince me to run, Saira Shameem, made it so. She walked me through how we - WE - would run the campaign, and we discussed my fears and doubts. This was in February of 1999 sometime, the year of the elections.” (Zaitun 2004: 1).

Saira Shameem, Zaitun and a few other like-minded friends¹¹ actually moved among voters in especially identified parliamentary constituencies in Selangor state, namely the Pantai Dalam, Segambut and Selayang.¹² Months before the election was called, the WCI operated at the grassroots level to gauge the average voters’ reactions to an independent woman candidate. This was because although WCI was launched officially in September 1999, the idea of WCI had been mooted way back in 1998 when several people, the majority of them women activists, had gotten together to discuss how they would engage in the upcoming elections. Their original thought was to use the Women’s Agenda For Change (WAC), launched in May the same year as an advocacy and lobby tool (Tan B.H. & Ng 2003, Lai S.Y. 2003, Martinez 2003). Their particular terms of reference in WAC was the chapter on “women and participatory democracy” in WAC.¹³ Just before the 1999 election, WAC was in fact endorsed by the then newly appointed Malaysian Deputy Prime

¹⁰ Saira Shameem was one of the individuals who participated in the working committee that wrote the draft position papers of WAC with representatives from Women’s Development Collective (WDC), All Women’s Action Society (AWAM), and Sisters In Islam. The other individuals were Ivy Josiah, Carol Yong, Sri Husnaini and Patricia Martinez (Martinez 2003: 77).

¹¹ The group, WCI, numbered about 80 persons at the height of the election campaign period and its core members were between 10 to 20 persons (interview with Saira Shameem, 21-08-05).

¹² Selayang, where Zaitun later contested, has three state constituencies namely Paya Jaras, Selayang Baru and Rawang. The election constituencies are made up of different parliamentary constituencies within which there would be generally between two to three state constituencies.

¹³ Martinez (2003: 75) considers it “the most comprehensive document ever to articulate women’s issues in Malaysia, covering major areas of importance to the nation beyond the more women-oriented concerns that women NGOs have traditionally covered. The ambit of the WAC is beyond even the scope of the Memorandum on the National Policy on Women submitted by the National Council of Women’s Organisation in Malaysia (NCWO) in 1989, the Malaysian government’s subsequent National Policy on Women in 1995, and the Action Plan for Women in Development in 1997.”



Minister (now the Prime Minister), Abdullah Badawi, and the then Deputy Minister of Youth and Sport, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abd Jalil (Martinez 2003: 86). However, the general view remains that, despite the creation of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Affairs, there has been very little application of its contents.

Nonetheless, it seemed that many in WCI felt drawn to direct participation, namely running an independent women's parliamentary candidate on a women's manifesto in the Federal Election (Zaitun 2004:1). Securing a candidate was WCI's first hurdle since "finding someone who was suitable and willing to run on a women's ticket took time and a lot of convincing. Those initially approached were basically not keen to contest. This was not unexpected: the difficulties women face in entering formal politics are well known and enough to deter all but the politically ambitious." (Tan B.H. & Ng 2003: 115-6). After much deliberation a strategic decision was reached by WCI and Zaitun's candidacy was officially launched on 11th September 1999.¹⁴ The statement that accompanied the launch pledged that if elected, Zaitun would represent the voices of the women's movement in standing for justice, democracy and good governance for everyone and at the same time, place special focus on women and youth. Zaitun was quoted as saying "I don't like injustice. I don't see why my rights should be more than somebody else's, just as I don't appreciate someone having more rights than I do. And so, I have to work towards making sure that all of us have equal breaks in the world. In fact I get enraged about this. I want to be part of making it different. I don't think I can sleep at night if I was not doing something about it" (Indramalar 2005: 3). The WCI statement further stated that "the great hope for a better Malaysia is when all of us take seriously our responsibility and our rights to actively participate in political processes in the country. What we are launching here today is part of that hope". (<http://www.candidate.freesevers.com>). Fluent in English and Malay and adequately well versed in Tamil and Cantonese to hold up her end of a conversation, with admirable skills in process facilitation, public speaking, media, management, counseling, writing and other technical skills such as video production and computer skills, with an activist background that has guaranteed her a public persona status, Zaitun was a natural choice for WCI candidate. Zaitun's aspirations for society were seen as reflecting the ordinary people's aspirations.¹⁵

¹⁴ Saira Shameem was Zaitun's campaign manager, Irene Xavier from the NGO Persatuan Sahabat Wanita (Friend to Women) was her Election Agent and Sri Husnani Sofjan was her alternative candidate (interview with Saira Shameem, 21-08-05).

¹⁵ According to Saira Shameem, Zaitun has such charisma when she speaks to the public that not only that Zaitun has a brilliant grasp of issues and the necessary languages to communicate with average voters, she could also concisely deconstruct and represent



One of Malaysian major opposition political parties, the Democratic Action Party (DAP)¹⁶ offered her the Selayang, the ethnically mixed parliamentary constituency in the economically developed Malaysian state of Selangor, that has been traditionally contested by DAP. Saira Shameem was quick to point out that this was achieved not without some hard-nosed negotiations. Ideologically, Zaitun's and the WCI's political aspirations were aligned with the opposition coalition front, the Alternative Front or the *Barisan Alternatif* (BA) of which DAP was a member. The other political parties were the socialist Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) and the newly formed Parti Keadilan Nasional (KeADILan) led by Datin Seri Wan Azizah bt Wan Ismail, the first woman to lead a political party in Malaysia. While Zaitun never became a member of DAP, or any other political party, and therefore not bound by party line, DAP was to support Zaitun with the necessary election machinery since WCI itself was limited in its resources to provide her with one. However, later Zaitun was to reflect that one of the toughest issues she had to deal with then, and to this day, why is an 'independent women's candidate, allied to the opposition front, running on the DAP ticket?'. This was probably in reference to DAP's identity as a Chinese party despite its multiracial ideology. The WCI's election strategy was to form an opposition "rainbow coalition" made up of not only alternative political parties of different ideologies but also of NGOs and concerned individuals.¹⁷

Election Candidate

Zaitun lost her bid for a seat in the Malaysian parliament. However, her participation was seen as the first small step towards women participating in the electoral process not under the patronage of a male dominant political party and breaking out of ethnic politics paradigm by centering on non-partisan public interest issues. WCI and Zaitun's participation have also been seen as a characteristic of the new politics¹⁸ that is generally expected to be

women's issues to the media and public. Besides being articulate, Zaitun is very credible as she is well known for her integrity and accountability. She is engaging and speaks to the hearts and minds of her audience such that she seems to almost physically take people's hearts in her hands (interview with Saira Shameem, 21-08-05).

¹⁶ DAP, a multi-racial but predominantly Chinese party, was founded in 1965. After Singapore's separation from Malaysia, the remnants of the People's Action Party in Malaysia reconstituted themselves as DAP. It appeals to the urban working class Chinese community and is a major opposition political party in Malaysia (NSTP Research & Information Services 1990: 21).

¹⁷ Interview with Saira Shameem on 21-08-2005.

¹⁸ "New politics" is a term that was coined in the late 1990s and popularly used as a concept in the analysis of 1999 and 2004 Malaysian general elections to explain particularly civil



the future. It was a challenge to the old party ways in Malaysian politics which to Zaitun “is primarily mired in Malay, Muslim, Male and Moneyed”.¹⁹ For the feminists and civil society activists, it also challenged traditional notions of women’s limited role in politics and that civil society is separate from election politics. WCI itself saw the initiative as a bridge between social activism through non-governmental organisations and partisan political participation. Most importantly for Zaitun and WCI, they have actually achieved what they set out to do and more.

Zaitun and WCI set out first of all to prove that women not only can participate significantly in a participatory democracy, advocate public issues and concerns that are not limited to women’s issues per se, but also to show especially the Malay Muslim women in the Parti Islam that it can happen without all the negative implications attached to it, while at the same time letting everyone see that women can and do run an honourable election campaign.²⁰ Zaitun’s candidacy fulfilled WCI’s objectives of increasing the awareness of the general public about women’s concerns and needs regarding more equitable attitudes, policies and laws, promoting the participation of the general public, especially women, in decision-making and electoral processes, and supporting women into decision-making positions and to hold office in the democratic process, in Parliament and in the Government. These were the central issues that make the backdrop of the current analysis of Zaitun’s election involvement.

i. Organisation and training

There are important constraints and challenges that can be identified with regard to women’s participation in the race for seats in the nation’s legislative body. These constraints and challenges had to be faced, addressed and overcome both by personal and organisational strengths. For WCI and Zaitun, it was tougher going since she had to depend on the goodwill of the election machinery of political parties that she was never a member of. She was and is keen to maintain her identity and credibility as a politically non-partisan social activist and continues to be independent of any political party.

Her WCI support group that launched her was seriously handicapped in the face of the political, financial, media and even governmental clout that her opponent and incumbent BN candidate, Chan Kong Choy, had.²¹

society participation, heightened gender awareness and public’s expectation of accountable leadership and good governance. (See, for example, Mohd Yusof & Azlan 2002, Loh & Saravanamuttu 2003).

¹⁹ Interview with Zaitun Kasim on 11-08-2005.

²⁰ Interviews with Zaitun Kasim on 11-08-2005 and Saira Shameem on 21-08-2005.

²¹ Zaitun polled 43 percent of the vote in the constituency, slashing the winning margin for the ruling coalition from 38,627 in the 1995 9th Malaysian General Election to 8,835. 73.94%



Consequently, Zaitun and her WCI sponsor very much relied on the internet for communication, information, information dissemination and decision-making.²²

Help from other politically involved NGOs in Malaysia was not expected to be significant since they are only a few and they did what they could both at the organisation and individual levels. These NGOs are more advocacy type with little active grassroots support and very much issue focused. (Saliha 2002, Weiss and Saliha 2003). As it was, even with what was said to be a new-found political awakening during this particular election period,²³ most NGOs that were involved with political or politically relevant issues had tried to remain outside direct involvement in the election process. However, WCI itself saw the initiative as a bridge between social activism through non-governmental organisations and political participation. And, in a country where elections have become synonymous with political parties as opposed to electoral politics, not only were Zaitun and WCI challenging traditional notions of women, but they were challenging traditional notions of political participation. The latter was in reference to direct involvement on no-political party actors in the election process (Zaitun 2004: 1).

Zaitun commented that no one person in WCI was a total expert on the “art of elections”. Much was learnt on the job although, according to Zaitun, earlier on, they had run a few sessions and trainings on the theory of running an election campaign. However, she found that it was not until one actually did it, lived it, breathed it, that one demystified it for oneself. Therefore, they quickly learnt to organise and run media committees, be on the negotiating team, do fundraising, be polling and counting agents, coordinate volunteers, leaflet, and coordinate campaign (Zaitun 2004: 9). Members were made clear of their objectives, roles and responsibilities and trained into being focused, assertive, firm in negotiations, communicative and having loads of team spirit. The experience had contributed to one of WCI’s objectives which were to create opportunities at various levels for more women to gain political experience and learn from it.

of 85,571 voters turned out to vote on polling day (Zaitun 2004: 1, Tan B.H. and Ng 2003: 121).

²² Zaitun credits her campaign manager, Saira Shameem, as having tremendous organizing skills and managed to pull together the necessary trainings for those who wanted to volunteer for the initiative, and know just how to maximise the skills and time that they offered.

²³ The 1999 Malaysian General Election took place against the backdrop of the political crisis of 1998 which saw the then deputy Prime Minister and deputy President of the powerful component of the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional, the United Malays National Organisation, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, sacked and arrested (Funston 1999, Weiss 1999).



ii. Independent platform

Zaitun explained that WCI chose to face up to all organisational constraints and went ahead pretty much on faith, goodwill of political allies that are mostly in the opposition front, the Barisan Alternatif (BA), trust in themselves and the voters, and the relevance of their public issues. At the minimum they “would make a splash on women’s issues”. The WCI decided not to join a party for fear of being subsumed and subsequently lost in a party structure. WCI also wanted to be independent enough to be critical of the opposition BA as well as the government BN parties where women’s issues were concerned. WCI, however, aligned itself with the opposition BA because it felt that to give its candidate, Zaitun, a fighting chance in the elections, it needed to ally with BA; moreover, BA’s manifesto was generally in tandem with WCI’s political aspirations. Zaitun refers to this alliance as tactical and strategic based at the time on the notion of an election “rainbow alliance” or “rainbow coalition”, which means an alliance of NGOs and alternative parties of different ideologies and societal objectives. The rainbow coalition proposal was for a progressive front that comprised party candidates and non-party, social movement candidates from human rights, women, indigenous, environment and workers sectors (Zaitun 2004: 3).

iii. Other women’s organisations

According to Zaitun, the concept of “*Wanita NGO pakai baju parti?*” (NGO woman wearing a party jacket) caught on in her election constituency. However, WCI’s alliance with BA had its problems. For example, it then became difficult for various women’s organisations to support her candidacy due to the apparent partisan political leanings of the WCI. In the end, Zaitun and WCI decided to abandon the idea of getting endorsement from women’s groups but depended instead on getting support from individuals. Zaitun remarked that it was a little sad that there were members of women’s organisations who were unable to draw this distinction and in numerous ways, tried to distance themselves from the candidate. At the same time they were also those who would have preferred that Zaitun join and be a candidate for one of the political parties, in particular the PRM, since a number of women NGO activists were already its members. This actually led to some taking the decision not to support the initiative. Thus, according to Zaitun (2004: 3), whether it was a case of party allegiance, lack of confidence in the viability of the candidacy, something as petty as personality clashes or whatever else it might have been, the upshot was the volunteers and supporters had to decide where they would invest their energies.

However, perhaps of particular significance in relation to this experience is Zaitun’s comment that she actually found the nine months post-election harder than the nine months leading up to it. She found that her having run



in the elections all of a sudden became a concern for the organisation she was working for. This she found perplexing since she felt they had not had a problem with her candidacy leading up to the elections. In particular, she identified new concerns about her being in the Executive Committee or being the spokesperson for the organisation. Zaitun felt there was a 'fear' that the organisation would be thought of as 'aligned with the opposition'. This she found amusing considering it already had a long history and a number of members associated with opposition parties. Zaitun understood that the fact that she had *actually* run became a concern and that it mattered little that WCI was independent and only tactically allied with the BA opposition coalition. As she put it, she felt stuck - she was no longer a candidate, but neither was she a party member. She saw herself as still a women's activist and wondered how long it would be before she was 'kosher' to run again for office in the organisation. Zaitun felt, or was made to feel, that she was a liability to the organisation, burdened with an identity that she was not going to be able to shake off. Consequently, she said she decided to spare the organisation, and most of all herself, any further aches, by resigning and going on to do free-lance work, associating herself with other NGOs that did not seem to have a problem with her having run for the elections (Zaitun 2004: 8).

iv. Media

Zaitun and WCI were covered by both the mainstream and alternative newspapers in all the different languages, namely Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil newspapers that make up the sum of print media in Malaysia. The media keenly followed her candidacy from the day it was announced and it became one of the most watched races in the country. Zaitun commented that some friends from the media told her that had she run as an opposition *party* member, she would not have got as much coverage as she did. Zaitun and WCI provided a new take on elections and, being highly focused on women's issues, got good media coverage from this angle. As such one of WCI's and Zaitun's media achievements was to increase and intensify the public's awareness of women's issues and concerns.

However, Zaitun also made the critical observation that the scope of media coverage on women candidate tended to highlight the woman candidate's family. It also tended to focus on her 'success' in balancing family, career and politics. To Zaitun, these views translate women's role in political participation as a replication of their perceived gender role in the family and was hardly something that male candidates were expected to deal with.

"I often got asked what my husband thought of my running for office, and this grated on me because I was fairly sure these questions were not being asked of the male candidates. I would tell the journalists that I could answer



their questions if they could assure me that they asked male candidates the same questions” (Zaitun 2004: 7)

Without spontaneous access to the mainstream media, Zaitun really had to count on door-to-door canvassing and group gatherings.²⁴ Selayang, the parliamentary constituency that Zaitun contested in, has a large electorate in terms of both population and geography. Technically, campaign personnel have to reach 86,000 registered voters²⁵ in the eight days that the Malaysian Election Commission had decreed as the campaign period.

v. Opposition to WCI candidate

Zaitun and WCI expected the reactions of the ruling BN coalition - condescending, barely disguising its ridicule, and accusing Zaitun of being a ‘free-rider’ and an ‘opportunistic’ candidate. Then there was also the reluctance of decision-makers within the coalition BA parties to accommodate the initiative, prompting Zaitun to remark that WCI had gone from being part of the ‘rainbow’ to being a stone in the shoe. Zaitun noted that there were many individuals within parties who were supportive of WCI’s efforts but lacked the clout to help. The arguments against ‘giving’ WCI a seat were varied (Zaitun 2004: 3):

- Malaysians were not ready for issue-based candidates and would not understand. Let the ‘war be won first’, and then we can think about it.
- Party machinery could look after *those* issues.
- Women’s issues were not central to the “main” struggle for greater democracy and that WCI somehow was disrupting the process, confusing the issues and splitting the votes.
- The Islamic party in the BA coalition had at the time felt that women were not ready for the rough and tumble of Malaysian politics.²⁶

At the end of the BA electoral negotiation over constituencies, in which the agreed formula was to put up only one BA candidate against BN’s, DAP decided to offer the Selayang parliamentary constituency to Zaitun and WCI. DAP election strategists could have very well recognised the political mileage and the political necessity for such a move in the context of the party alignments and gender dynamics of the Election. DAP could gain political

²⁴ Political rallies have been outlawed under the Malaysian election rules.

²⁵ All Malaysians who are mentally healthy, not in prison and aged 21 and above are eligible to register as voters and to vote in elections.

²⁶ Although PAS held to the same view up to the 2004 Election, it did field women candidates in this Election on condition that the women ‘obtained’ the permission of their husbands before contesting’ (Zaitun 2004: 3).



pluses especially among urban voters where its traditional supporters are and where gender and civil society issues are taking roots. Therefore, supporting Zaitun, a woman candidate who was also an independent NGO candidate did offer some valuable electoral benefits. And, perhaps it may not be too broad an assumption to make the observation that it was not so easy even for DAP, noted for its more liberal attitude towards women's participation in politics, to find qualified women willing to be election candidate.

vi. Negotiating space and legitimacy

Zaitun used the phrase, 'negotiating space and legitimacy', to describe her campaign strategies and tactics. One of the situations that she related both during our interview and in her paper (Zaitun 2004: 4) was the incident that took place on nomination day itself when the WCI women and supporters refused to walk behind the men to the nomination centre. The BA party leaders, in particular those from PAS, the Islamic party, according to Zaitun had suggested "the following arrangement for the procession: candidates, religious leaders, followed by professionals, and then women! We argued against this, and in spite of agreeing to do away with the hierarchy, it still went ahead in that fashion. The WCI women became extremely unhappy, marched to the front through the crowd of men asking them to move aside, gesturing to other women to follow suit. We sang our songs, did our street theatre, and within half an hour, the 2,000 people from various parties were singing our song!" Zaitun and WCI in fact exposed the seasoned party campaigners to different forms of campaign tactics that highlighted their campaign issues, such as street theatre and end-of-day briefing sessions which to them seemed to be frivolous and "a tad too 'touchy-feely'. We weren't regimented enough and talking about our feelings weren't going to do us any good apparently!" To the WCI campaign team, the sessions not only allowed them to review progress and plan on how to maximise the short campaign days, they were also *re-energising* for the women.

In the end, however, Zaitun feels that their assertiveness, organisational pragmatism, principled commitment to their cause and voter-focused approach won them genuine recognition and admiration from both male and female seasoned party election campaigners.

vii. Personal challenges

The main personal issues that Zaitun had to deal with were her ethnicity, her public personal image as a muslim woman, gender biases of the public, and some concerns of her personal safety. Zaitun wrote (2004: 5) that it is not uncommon to read about how women candidates have a harder time with the 'image' issue, "but it is not till it hits you between the eyes that you realise how intrusive these comments, which ranged from questions about sexuality



to clothing and behaviour, can be.” She also recalled receiving “subtle and at times not-so-subtle remarks on how we should drop the NGO image ...that we needed a more polished, up market look, that the NGO image of slacks and blouses would not be able to win the crowd. Then, of course, the pressure to wear a headscarf to appeal to Muslim voters.” Zaitun resisted all the pressures with regard to her personal image and in retrospect, she decided that sticking to her guns was the best thing she ever did, not only because she and WCI remained true to their principles, but also she felt that on balance, fewer people, especially younger women, were intimidated by them. On the question of her being married to an Australian, Zaitun felt that it did not seem to matter especially since he seemed to be readily accepted by her voters as he was comfortable in the local culture,²⁷ readily observed Islamic prayer practices and spoke Malay, the local language. Zaitun related an incident with a voter who made this personal assessment of her which seemed to sum up her election profile: “you look Indian, so the Indians will vote for you, you are running under a Chinese party symbol, so we’ll have the Chinese votes, and you are Muslim - well, it would help if you wore a headscarf, but still . . . we’ll also have the Malay votes.” (Zaitun 2004: 6).

viii. Post-election review

Specifically reviewing her election result, Zaitun’s personal evaluation of challenges and major hurdles she had to deal with were *firstly* the fact that elections were privately funded. At RM5, 000.00 (US\$ 1, 317), the deposit to get into the running²⁸, plus another RM5000.00 for council deposit, making it a total of RM10,000.00 (US\$2, 634) just to get nominated, is amongst the highest of the Commonwealth countries; and, although by law, campaign costs were not to exceed RM50,000.00 (US\$13, 170), the actual amount spent on the ground by different candidates was obviously much more than that. Zaitun and WCI did not have that kind of financial luxury. They had to make do with basically a shoe string budget. *Secondly*, Zaitun’s further analysis is that as an aggregate, women in Malaysia earn approximately 50% of men’s income and therefore have far less access to resources, whether their own, or corporate backing/donors, than men do. It therefore follows, she argues, that the disposable wealth available to women is much less than that available to men so that even before women could get to ‘first base’, ie, nomination day,

²⁷ Zaitun was confident that even IF it was raised as an issue, their past experience was that he was usually well accepted because of the fact that he was comfortable with the local culture, etc.

²⁸ For the 2004 elections, the Malaysian Election Commission raised the election deposit for federal candidates to RM10,000.00 (USD2634) – “apparently in order to keep out frivolous and ‘mischievous’, publicity-seeking candidates” and a further RM5000.00 (USD1317) council deposit, making it a total of RM15,000.00 just to get nominated (Zaitun 2004: 7).



many are already out of the race simply because they cannot afford the RM10,000.00.

Thirdly, the short campaign period of eight days left opposition candidates, and a novice candidate such as Zaitun with her independent platform that was the first of its kind in Malaysia, very badly handicapped in terms of money, material and human resources compared not only to her government party opponent, but also to other candidates from among tactical allies. *Fourthly*, the main stream Malaysian media, both print and electronic, that has always been government controlled, overwhelmingly favoured the ruling party although Zaitun conceded that since she was a novelty in the election scene, she did enjoy greater media coverage compared to many opposition candidates. And *fifthly*, Malaysian electorate has been schooled in ethnic-based politics. Therefore, it was also an uphill climb to get them to think of issues and credibility of candidates instead of party loyalty²⁹ (Zaitun 2004: 2-7).

Challenges within the political environment

The majority of female Malaysian Chinese, Indian and other than Malay indigenous have indicated that they are “not interested in politics” (Rashila 1995, Saliha 1995, 1999 and 2004). Further probes show that it is basically because politics is perceived by women to be a very aggressive, often unethical and even violent kind of social sport where the winner takes all - that it does not appeal to women. There is a real sense of some femininity lost when women step out of the domestic sphere into the traditionally masculine arena of politics. Many qualified women also demurred from an active political career.³⁰ Many subscribe to the adage that behind a successful man there is a woman playing the supportive role, maintaining balance and harmony at home where her *rightful* place is.

i. Gender perspectives

Socially and culturally speaking, gender biased attitude that handicaps women candidates in Malaysian elections is found across all ethnic communities in

²⁹ Researchers of Malaysian elections are generally agreed that male and female voters in are influenced by similar dynamics and voted not based on a gendered choice but party loyalties, ethnic consideration, promises of a better economic future, gratefulness for past favours and perceived fulfillment of life’s expectation due to government development policies, and in some cases there was really genuine appreciation for some financial as well as physical help to get to the polling stations.

³⁰ As stated by Dr Siti Mariah Mahmud, a central committee member of Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) and current information chief of Dewan Muslimat “There are some women who feel that we don’t have to play such a big role. Since the men are doing it, why crack our heads? . . . some of them are quite happy being behind the men” (Joycelyn Tan <http://www.thesundaily.com/article>). This attitude is not only prevalent within PAS but is also found in the other political parties.



Malaysia. Furthermore, the fierce jockeying for election constituencies within political parties generally sidelines women. This results in women who are *acceptable* to party leadership and voters *may not* be women who will speak for women or *brave women* who are gender sensitive. This factor is further enforced by the general party structure and practices whereby the women's wings are formed *in support of* the parties' main agenda. Research by Roslina (2005: Table 5) that was done prior to the 2004 general election in Terengganu, an east coast state of Peninsular Malaysia which was then administered by PAS government but has in the last election been wrested by BN, illustrates the point. 56% of her male respondents disagreed that "there was a readiness among people in Terengganu to accept women holding positions at level of public decision-making" despite the fact that 74.4% agreed that "women's issues are well handled by women rather than men" and 66.3% agreed that "women should not be prevented to be candidates for the elections." What is clear is that *firstly*, one of the biggest obstacles to women's participation beyond being coffee makers and *perayu undi* or vote getters is men's own resistance. No doubt, sometimes with a little help from the women themselves, men have continued to perpetuate the stereotype that women are happiest in the private sphere - home and family first and "anyway, it's a man's world out there" perception. *Secondly*, men have not represented or made any attempt at serious representation of women's interests at the legislative level. In fact they are prone to trivialise or marginalise such issues.

ii. Ethnicity

Ethnic politics and party loyalty largely determine the votes of the majority at Malaysian general elections. Despite the non-ethnic ideological orientations of some of the political parties, both in the BN and BA coalitions, these parties have become dominated by single ethnic groups. Among the major ones are the Gerakan (Chinese), DAP (Chinese), KeADILan (Malays), and PRM (Malays). This characteristic of Malaysian political parties is also directly related to the country's ethnic oriented development policies thus prompting each political party to champion particular ethnic interests or play on the voters' ethnic sentiments.

iii. Local geo-politics

The characteristics of urban and rural voters differ. The first obvious feature is that rural voters are predominantly Malays. Being Malays, their main political choices are PAS, KeADILan and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) which has been the dominant political party both within the BN government party coalition and in the Malaysian political scenario in general. In the urban areas, there are more sophisticated election issues being weighed such as which candidate would actually speak up for his/her constituency's interests, which party does a candidate represent, and



what are the candidates' parties' positions on various issues close to the voters' hearts, which party can 'deliver' certain development project; which party would actually act as a successful leverage to certain demands; and which candidate was a little more squeaky clean than the other alternatives, thus allowing non-Malay and opposition parties more opportunity at the polls. However, in general, it would appear that the majority of male and female urban voters did not vote based on a gender bias perspective but voted as they have always voted in previous elections – based on ethnic sentiments and party loyalties or preferences.

iv. Women issues

Since the 1990s and with the significant impact of globalisation, women issues are more commonly heard in election speeches. Nonetheless, they remain marginal except among urban professional middle class voters in general. In fact, other than Zaitun, there was no really significant debate on women issues by either female or male candidates nor was there obvious serious sensitivity to *women* issues among the general voters. As a matter of fact, most women candidates tended to be quite anxious to stress the fact that they represented their particular party's manifesto and would speak up on issues important to every individual in her constituency - that they were not on the women-for-women only track. Although some of the candidates were anxious that they should not be seen as neglecting women issues, they still made it clear that those were not necessarily their main focus in their quest to serve the people. As a matter of fact, some women politicians, Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen, the Wanita Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) chief for example, was quoted in the print media as having categorically stated during the 2004 Malaysian General Election that there was no such divide as men's and women's issues - "women's issues are equivalent to men's". This contrasted with the 1999 General Election when women civil society activists launched WAC prior to the election, detailing the vision and mission of the Malaysian women in the nation's development. This was followed by the formation of the Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI) that launched Zaitun Kasim as an independent women candidate who centered both gender and environmental issues in her campaign.³¹

³¹ In the 2004 election, however, **some individuals who were** prime movers of WAC and WCI **were involved in the formation of** the Women Monitoring Election Candidates (WoMEC) initiative. **WDC has been credited with its drafting.** Their intention was to monitor that all elected candidates would fulfill their election pledges. It was also these women civil society activists who practically forced the candidates and the media to address *women* issues such as focusing on stricter and harsher laws for rape offenders, PAS's conservative positions on women's rights and place in society and politics, various laws and



v. Enabling laws and policies

In Zaitun's case, as her platform was clearly civil society issues with women issues as one of her major concerns, various legislation and policy initiatives by the government actually gave her important leverage. These are a number of landmarks for Malaysian women movements—the 1989 Malaysian National Policy On Women which finally culminated in the implementation of Malaysian Action Plan For Women In Development in 1997 by the Women Affairs Department (at the time in the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development); the 1990 Malaysian Women Manifesto that deals with status and rights of women at work, legal discrimination and violence against women, negative impacts of development, and issues of health, corruption and human rights; the enactment of Domestic Violence Act in 1994; the Malaysian Government's endorsement (with reservations) in 1995 of the 1979 UN Convention To Eliminate All Forms Of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); the Fourth UN Conference On Women and its parallel NGO Forum On Women in Beijing (1995); the 1998 Malaysian Reformasi movement; and, the launching of the 1999 Women's Agenda For Change as well as the Women Candidacy Initiative that launched Zaitun as a candidate.

However, Zaitun has a personal insight into the working of some election laws, in particular with regard to election 'offences'. Her perception is that election offences committed by the ruling BN party were rife throughout the nation, and Selayang, her constituency, was no exception. However, she found that filing election petitions was not only costly, but rarely generated any form of redress from the courts. Instead she found her party in court for not filing a statement of accounts on time. This, Zaitun considers "one of those traps for new players". Although they eventually sorted that out, it was still something that they had to deal with for almost three and a half years after the election (Zaitun 2004: 8).

vi. Changing perceptions

Zaitun and other like-minded women candidates may in the future benefit from more liberal gender construction that has slowly pervaded Malaysian society. There is an undercurrent of an increasingly liberal public's greater awareness of cultural gender construction and willingness to adjust to the fact that women can be capable leaders. A professional man based in the cosmopolitan Klang Valley better sums up this trend, "I don't care if they are men or women. What's important is that they do their jobs well!"

Just as significant is the changing perception among women themselves about their political efficacy. Zaitun and others like her are representatives of this

provisions that they saw as discriminatory to women, as well as laws for the protection of children.



new breed of women.³² They are well educated, have acquired experiences beyond Malaysian shores, have the necessary economic independence, have grassroots experience through civil society activism, and have had invaluable experience in various public leadership capacities. This combination of education, economic independence, leadership in social movements, professional experiences and public networking has promoted their high sense of political efficacy and confidence in their ability to effect change.

vii. Political opportunities

All political life is played out within parameters enforced by the state, whether or not they have been voluntarily agreed upon by citizens. Thus, official steps taken by the government give structure to evolving public trends. The 1989 Malaysian National Policy on Women (NPW) with its two main objectives being one of them. These objectives are *firstly*, to ensure an equitable sharing in the acquisition of resources, information, opportunities and benefits of development for men and women. It highlights that the objective of equality and justice must be made the essence of development policies which must be people-oriented so that women, who constitute half of the nation's population, can contribute and optimally realise their potential. *Secondly*, to integrate women in all sectors of development in accordance with their capabilities and needs, in order to enhance the quality of life, eradicate poverty, ignorance and illiteracy, and ensure a peaceful and prosperous nation. These objectives are translated into action plans in eight sectors: national machinery for policy of integrating women in development³³, health, education and training, legislation, employment, politics, media and religion.

In politics, the government undertakes to initiate legislation and enforcement to ensure that women are fully involved in the political life of the nation. *Firstly*, it shall take steps to increase the recruitment, the nomination and the appointment of women to decision- and policy-making bodies at the national, state and local levels until a just representation is achieved; and, *secondly*, it promises to support the emergence of more women representatives in policy-making and at the executive levels in Parliament, state legislative assemblies, local governments and other related agencies (HAWA 1995: 19-20). The idea of 30% parity as suggested by the 1995 Beijing Conference has been popularly bandied about. However, the NWP has been slow in its implementation and this has not become a common reference point for the

³² More than 50% in tertiary education are women. In 1983 only 48%, in 1993 66%. Literacy rate among women in Malaysia was 64% in 1989, 80% in 1991. Health care is good. Result: more women entering professional, administrative and management sectors.

³³ In conjunction with the 1975 UN Declaration of Decade for Women, Malaysia established the National Advisory Council for Integrating Women in Development on July 16, 1975.



Malaysian general public. Thus, while it could be an empowering factor for Zaitun in her campaigns, it has not become so.

WCI and Political Empowerment

The Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI)³⁴ is towards promoting the participation of women in the political process. Its aim is to move women's voices from the periphery to the centre. Its philosophy is that "the seed of DEMOCRACY lies in the principle that the LEGITIMACY of the POWER to make decisions about PEOPLE'S LIVES, their SOCIETY and their COUNTRY should derive from a CHOICE by THOSE who will be AFFECTED". And, for the initiative the latter means WOMEN. It believes that participation in parliamentary politics is one of the means to increase participation of society, especially women in decision-making processes thus giving them a share of the power to make decisions that would affect them. The idea of its formation was mooted in August 1998.

Allying with the BA alternative front, it created history in Malaysia by running the first Malaysian independent women's candidate in the Tenth General elections held in November 1999. Polling 43% of valid votes, it slashed the winning margin for the incumbent candidate from the BN ruling coalition party but it did not win the Selayang parliamentary seat where its candidate, Zaitun, stood. However, WCI claimed "a resounding victory, though not in the conventional sense of the word!" for it believes that it had successfully created a bridge between political participation as party members and social activism through NGOs, created the space for women to participate in politics on their own terms, lessened fear of politics and shown it to be accessible enough to include a broad level of participation for women. In the context of Malaysian partisan ethnic politics, with its diverse racial background, WCI claimed yet another victory in the multi-racial cooperation sector. It received both national and international coverage.

WCI's core members were about twenty dedicated women and men while its supporters and volunteers came from all walks of life and diverse ethnic backgrounds. The majority of them were younger women with an average age of thirty-three. Several were activists who had been involved in women's rights activism for many years and more than half of the core members were also members of other women's groups. Most of them had full-time jobs as activist, journalist, programme coordinator, teacher, tutor, marketing personnel, masseur, engineer, homemaker and students. Their original idea was to consider the possibility of fielding a small coalition of independent women candidates in the future general elections, beginning with the 1999

³⁴ For detailed references used in this section, see WCI brochures, Tan B.H. & Ng 2003, Lai S.Y. 2003 and Martinez 2003.



Election. This women's coalition would be part of the Gagasan Demokrasi Rakyat, which was a broader coalition of NGOs and opposition parties. Its main thrust was to chart a fresh new path in Malaysian politics which they saw as inherently identified with race.

WCI addressed daily issues and concerns confronting women. It asked voters, especially women voters who form half of them, questions closest to women's hearts : For the same work why are women paid less than men? Why is there no decent child-care to help women and men? Why are some laws better for men than for women? Why is it that every day in Malaysia, there are about four women abused, raped or violated? WCI pointed out that women made up half of the workers employed in factories, in business and in the government, that women who worked at home were also workers who contribute to the nation's development and progress and that women do care about what is happening to the country and government. WCI campaign machinery highlighted the different laws and policies that discriminate against women, social and medical services that are being privatised and the inefficient and inadequate public transportation that are causing hardships to single mothers and low income groups. WCI's promise is that it would advance the status of women and put an end to discrimination against women. WCI wants women to be more involved in the running of Malaysia and in the making of its laws. Its humanist and feminist take on society's priorities made WCI's calls for "a society that respects every human being, regardless of gender, race, class and religion", "a more equal society for women" and "a government which can improve our children's lives" touched many sincere hearts.

Zaitun emphasized both in her campaigns and in her election manifesto (Appendix A) that to vote for Zaitun, the WCI's candidate, was to vote for what women were actually asking for: an open and transparent system that respects equal rights for women, fair and free judicial systems that respect the rights and needs of women, an end to all forms of discrimination, violence and abuse, equality in work opportunities and equal pay for equal work, social and medical services that are good and affordable for all women and most of all participation of women who prioritize women's concerns policy-making levels. DAP backed her position in one of the leaflets that it printed for her campaign by calling for "vote for change" and that voting for Zaitun meant bringing the people back to Parliament, voting for justice and equality, freedom from corruption and cronyism, an end to oppressive laws, an end to discrimination against women, sustainable development, just and equitable distribution of wealth, return of local council elections, and efficient-affordable basic amenities: housing, water, electricity, health and education.



With the 1999 election over, WCI continues to make itself relevant to the people. Therefore, it declares its objectives today are to increase the awareness of the general public about women's concerns and needs regarding more equitable attitudes, policies and laws, promote the participation of the general public, especially women, in decision-making and electoral processes, support women into decision-making positions and to hold office in the democratic process both in Parliament and in the Government. It plans to compile a manual based on its 1999 experience, "A Beginners Guide to Elections - How to Plan and Carry Out Your Own Campaign", convert its original e-mail discussion list for organising and planning the candidacy into a women's discussion list to encourage more discussion as well as for it to be a networking place for activists on women's issues in the country, conduct trainings and seminars on women and decision-making and on "knowing your rights" and set up a resource centre to house data base to be used in its next election campaign. In short, WCI is not over yet. Its members and supporters believe it to be relevant and needed to effect the changes that it envisages in the Malaysian gendered political scenario. It prefers, however, to remain un-institutionalised.³⁵

Although WCI and Zaitun found their direct participation in the 1999 election inspiring, enlightening and empowering, they did not, however, participate in the 2004 elections. There were various reasons for this, of which perhaps, not least, was the change in the political scenario whereby the BN coalition had consolidated its position *vis a vis* the unprecedented challenge from the BA alternative front in the 1999 elections. Besides its traditional development projects, the BN basically did this via people-friendly approach and image, especially towards young voters who had been identified as the mainstay of opposition and progressive forces. The WCI members and leadership were perhaps burnt out by the experience and needed more time to recuperate. Furthermore in order to participate, they must also have full coffers.

LESSONS LEARNT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In retrospect, there are many lessons learnt at various levels, i.e. the personal, organisational, legal, cultural and political levels. There are also many critical reflections and even harsh evaluation based on hind sights by WCI, Zaitun and other independent as well as not-so-independent analysts. Their offshoots are numerous recommendations and "how we/they could have

³⁵ In Malaysia any organisation has to register itself with the Registrar of Societies, declare itself a NGO or political society, and obtain an approval for its registration before it can function. After it does, it is subject to the rules and procedures of the Societies Act that gives a wide range of legal and discretionary power to the Registrar of Societies.



done it better” views being offered. In fairness, there would probably be more gains for future election endeavours if we are to consider their positive values.

Firstly, Zaitun can be said to represent the progressive and feminist persona of contemporary women leadership model in Malaysia. A growing trend that may prove to be a significant plus factor for candidates such as Zaitun - who has civil society activism as the foundation of her political career - is perhaps the notion encapsulated in the slogan that is being popularised by the young women’s wing of UMNO established in 2001, *Puteri UMNO*, “less politicking more social service”. That may speak of a trend to come. Nonetheless, zeroing in on the chances of success for women candidates in Malaysian elections, Zaitun prefers to highlight the need to challenge the current elections paradigm which is also inherently gendered. Otherwise, as candidates, women would be caught needing the same 3Ms as their male counterparts: money, machinery and media as well as having to contend with the built-in advantages of candidates from the deeply entrenched incumbent BN party.

In assessing whether she personally felt WCI had made an impact, Zaitun conceded that it would be difficult to gauge just how much of the 43% valid votes that she garnered had to do with WCI’s candidacy and how much it had to do with the 1999 national political mood of anti-BN led government following the 1998 Anwar Ibrahim reformasi episode (Funston 1999, Weiss 1999). She discerned that many votes were indeed protest votes. This was highly evident in the big losses suffered by the ruling coalition in many seats and that her Selangor seat had also reaped the gains of what seemed to be the wind of change in Malaysian politics. Nonetheless, Zaitun is certain also that WCI’s initiative was being noticed and appreciated (Zaitun 2004: 9):

- Many were in fact curious that we non-party members - “normal people” as several young women put it - were able to run [in the election], when they had thought that it was the sole preserve of political parties.
- Several people came up to us after the elections, gleeful that we had given the incumbent a run for his money and that he really had to get his hands dirty for a change!
- Many women were encouraged by seeing us participate and wanted to help. From the woman fish-vendor who insisted on putting our posters around her fish stall to encourage other women to vote, or the young women who said they were voting for the first time because they think a woman can understand another woman, or the ethnic Indian domestic helper who said she was willing to give up the party



she had voted for in so many years, to the women who spoke about women's issues, to the elderly men who told us about their daughters who were adamant that women should be voted in.

- One woman party member declared that it just hit her why we were running the way we were: we could actually sit at the negotiating table with the men - that's a big difference!
- Many who supported and volunteered to campaign for WCI candidacy say that the experience was one of the most empowering experiences of their lives.

Earlier in her post-election review Zaitun had highlighted other significant lessons learnt from her own experience ranging from the financial aspect to the existing voter attitude in casting their votes. In addition, there was also the impact of public exposure and media coverage on her personal life. Zaitun said that she started to become very conscious about not being seen in particular places, not hugging her male friends in public or having male friends visiting her in her home, and was anxious about who was watching her. By her reckoning, it took her a few years to rediscover HER rhythm (Zaitun 2004: 8). During the campaign period itself, the WCI members and supporters, in particular those "strong, passionate, caring" women, developed mutual support and experienced acute sense of camaraderie. "We fought, we got upset with each other, we hugged each other, had meals and tea with each other, confided in each other . . . Some altercations lasted way after the elections. But our friendships lasted even longer." Summing up the whole experience at the personal level, Zaitun observed that what was conventionally the domain of political parties became a source of pride and strength for individuals involved in WCI (Zaitun 2004:9).

In terms of recommendations, Zaitun is definitely of the opinion that the election process in Malaysia needs a radical overhaul. To her, as she made out in her post-election review earlier, there is a clear need to structure out the current gendered, privately-funded, and first-past-the-post election system. In order to achieve effective women participation and representation, the rules and boundaries that have previously been set by what she referred to as "the Malaysian state and all its machinery [that] seem to be largely male, Malay, Muslim and moneyed" must be replaced. With this in mind, WCI formulated a memorandum to the Government calling for several measures to be undertaken to remove discrimination against women and to actively encourage participation by

- Halting any further amendments to the election laws without fully studying the impact they will have on women



- To conduct a comprehensive study on how the current processes affect the participation of women
- Eliminate deposits for women candidates and set up special funds to support independent women candidates through the elections

Secondly, WCI itself has done some soul searching and self evaluation on its aims, limitations, strengths and opportunities. It hopes to set up a resource centre with the objective that it would be the base for the next election. The usefulness of an exhaustive data base on any constituency cannot be underestimated. Saira Shameem's evaluation notes on the WCI campaign was positive about progress: "next one year: set up a center; three years: help it grow; five years: run and win a parliamentary seat". However, Zaitun pointed out also the need to walk the talk in that given that women's rights to political participation cannot be advanced where there is a lack of basic freedoms to information, speech, association and assembly. These basic freedoms must be guaranteed and promoted through the abolition or repeal of acts that violate these fundamental rights. There should be the practice of more genuine democracy whereby the simple desire of those who are not into partisan politics or party involvement, but who want to be part of a participatory democracy, could be realised.

Thirdly, in the context of the larger Malaysian women's movement, there have been some critical evaluations of the WCI experiment and experience. For example, Tan Beng Hui and Cecilia Ng (2003), both well-known academics and respected women activists in Malaysia, while applauding the WCI election participation initiative, also highlighted a number of pertinent points in their analysis. Reflecting on the pluralism, complexities and tensions within the women's movement when it came to political strategies and direction, they noted a couple of trends and alignments, namely that WCI attracted support from the younger generation and individuals while its contemporary, WAC, was backed by established women's organisations and individuals (Tan & Ng 2003: 120-121) and that in contrast to WCI's innovative move to be directly involved in the electoral process, WAC, while finding it necessary to engage in a certain amount of lobbying and advocacy work with relevant official bodies and individuals, maintains the familiar strategy of remaining outside formal politics and resisting crossing over into the official sphere (Tan and Ng 2003: 119).

In reflecting upon lessons learnt from WCI's experience Tan and Ng (2003: 120-121) speculated at the possibility of greater success at the polls if WCI was "to seek formal backing by women's NGOs and the like". Although it is unclear as to the reasons why or what was meant by "seeking formal backing", in their opinion, had this happened, the probability that WCI might have had "a greater pool of resources to tap into, as well as increased



credibility” and more effective campaign by broadening their “support base”. Their recommendation is that the women’s movement needs to consolidate its own position by gaining strength through building more alliances with those who share its aspirations.³⁶ In reviewing the WCI’s experience, there were various positive outcomes. These include the more vigorous note of definite critical awareness among women’s groups in general to develop “a more critical stance on how to deal with the gender-biased positions of political parties” (Tan and Ng 2003: 123), keen awareness that the backing of a strong and vibrant women’s movement is necessary for future attempts by women to enter the formal political arena and function effectively in representing women’s interests; and, the significance of coordinated political directions and strategies, while respecting the plurality of differences within the movement.

CONCLUSION

Zaitun and WCI have without a doubt showed up some new dimensions and possibilities in terms of alternative ways to center and give high profile to women’s issues and concerns in representative politics. At the same time their alliance with seasoned campaigners from the political parties, especially DAP and PAS, had also impressed the latter about a different *modus operandi* that they have been used to. These include: women can be independent leaders and organisers at that level; a positive and engaged attitude towards problem solving; a minimum confrontational and more negotiable leadership style; and a general emphasis on a democratic and collective responsibility decision-making style.

At the individual level, for women who are qualified and prepared to contribute to society through the nation’s elected legislature based on an independent platform, such as Zaitun, there must be a more concerted effort at breaking down barriers to women empowerment with regard to clearing a path to legislative bodies. Towards this positive vision, Zaitun is proposing a refreshing concept of a Parliamentary Gender Caucus that cuts across ethnic and party politics to address and resolve some of the issues that have been

³⁶ Tan and Ng (2003: 122-23) are of the opinion that WCI’s election alliance with BA opposition coalition political parties, namely PAS, DAP, KeADILan, and PRM, sent out two confusing, if not actually conflicting, messages. In their view, the general public may not have been so clear or able to separate WCI’s tactical alliance with the BA opposition front and WCI’s role that is part of the larger women’s movement, as an independent critical voice of gender discrimination. As a matter of fact the media’s sensationalising of this political alliance, while tactical no doubt, also left women’s groups not in the most comfortable position. This point was made in the context of PAS’s generally closed attitude towards women leadership and participation in the public sphere and its outright rejection of their women members contesting in the elections.



highlighted through her own experience. In Zaitun's opinion, "this is one of many ideas on how we can improve the representation of women and ensure gender is on the agenda. Parliamentary Gender Caucuses do exist in other countries and we can learn a lot from those experiences." In fact Zaitun has started some ground work on this idea and floated it among some like-minded women social activists and politicians. At the same time she also calls attention to other ideas such as getting the Elections Commission to institute temporary special measures on increasing the participation of women.

Society and nation should not be denied committed and capable services of elected women representatives. Not least, in a political system with a strong government like Malaysia, the *government* itself must have the political will to ensure the implementations of various legal and political instruments that are already in place³⁷ in guaranteeing women's fair passage to equal participation in all sectors. It must, for example, conscientiously promote and implement gender-sensitive policies. Such initiatives from the government would create a more empowering environment for women keen to serve society and nation via the electoral process. The *media* must conscientiously and consciously promote gender sensitive values with fair portrayal of women's effectiveness in the public sphere. Community and national *opinion leaders*, from both within as well as outside political parties, must show disciplined commitment in inculcating recognition and appreciation for able, credible, responsible and accountable leadership regardless of sex.

Furthermore, there is a clear need to review and to restructure *party mechanisms* to ensure level playing fields for women to participate equally and to generate healthy politics truly committed to the betterment of women's interests and public good. In this context, the issue of quota usually comes up. However, as pointed out by Saira Shameem, the introduction of 30% parity quota that is much discussed and argued about, will only achieve gender mainstreaming. But if there is no structural change, the gender biased or patriarchal power relations will still remain. Lastly, gender education of the general *public* is an enormous task but must be addressed. After all, at the end of the day, everything that women's movements, social movements and political parties strive for are nothing less than the public good. It is only with such synergy between women and an empowering environment that will work towards the goals that Zaitun and WCI have set themselves to achieve. WCI can be said to have had fired the first salvo and, Zaitun, it's fodder, succinctly summarises

³⁷ Infected by the liberal spirit of the new millennium, the nation's constitution had been amended in 2003 to specifically guarantee non-discrimination based on sex with regard to law, appointment to jobs, ownership and dispensation of wealth, establishing and practicing any form of trade, business, profession, vocation or employment. The original provision only stated non-discrimination with regard to religion, race, ethnicity, and place of birth (Chapter II, Article 8).



what she represents: “I am about transformative politics, *not* alternative politics”.

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