MALAYSIA’S 14TH GENERAL ELECTION THROUGH A GENDER LENS
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Executive Summary

This monograph analyses women’s involvement in Malaysia’s 14th general election from a gender perspective. It seeks to address the issue of women’s underrepresentation in political leadership by evaluating the experiences of women candidates in five states, namely Johor, Sabah, Perlis, Penang and Selangor. The research found that despite all the lobbying by female political leaders for a minimum of 30 per cent women candidates, this target was not met. Even though newer political parties faced challenges in securing women contestants, overall, there was no shortage of women who were willing to stand as electoral candidates.

In larger and older parties there were more potential women candidates than there were available or identified seats for women to contest. However, only 11 per cent of women ended up being selected to run for both parliamentary and state seats. Consequently, it was no surprise that the overall outcome of GE14 saw only 14.4 per cent women elected to parliament and 12.5 per cent to the state legislative assembly. No state attained the minimum 30 per cent benchmark of salient women’s representation in political leadership. Internal party characteristics and competition were by far the most important determinants of the number and nature of women’s candidacy within each party at the GE14.

Factors which held back women from an effective representation included their extremely low candidacy rate, electoral horse-trading between coalition party members, women’s concerns being not a campaign issue, sexism in campaigning and gender-differentiated campaign approaches. There were also regional differences in terms of the patterns of gender inequality and underrepresentation. Indeed, the pathways for women’s candidacy could be effected by a range of factors, from patron-client relationship to family connection, to party selection process based on its level of transparency, accountability and planning strategy.

This monograph concludes with three (3) recommendations;

• The first is for a major shift from the patriarchal and exclusionary practices of all political parties, towards the adoption of ‘new’ values of gender equality and inclusivity.

• The second is to call for a legislation by way of temporary special measures as in gender quotas, with the condition of training and other supportive measures be put in place to upgrade the leadership quality of women candidates.

• The third recommendation is for reforming the first-past-the-post electoral system, in place of a new option which can be more effective in ensuring diversity and inclusivity in candidacy.
Introduction

In many countries gender cuts across party affiliations but with ideological, religious, or ethnic identities prevailing as dominant features (Htun 2004). In Malaysia, mono-ethnic parties are legal and predominant, with UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and Pas (Parti Islam SeMalaysia, Islamic Party of Malaysia) being open only to Malay-Muslims. Members of the Mca (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) are likewise from their respective ethnic groups. In all of these, gender has been overshadowed by the ethnic — and in the case of Muslims, religious — interests of the party, resulting in gender equality being sidelined as well. For example, the political activity of women in UMNO was driven more by a need to achieve “communal nationalism” than by a need to realise women's interests. Thus women’s active participation in party politics was ultimately recognised as crucial for a party’s survival but not for reasons that would contribute towards the promotion of women’s leadership (Noraini 1984, 222-240, 390).

A study of ethnic-based non-bumiputera (non-indigenous) political parties showed an equally difficult path for women of all ethnicities to achieve high positions within their parties (Mahfudzah 1999). As for class or clan influence, it has been found that among some Malay women their early entry into formal politics was determined largely by male patronage or through a dynastic male line (Rogers 1986; Shamsul 1986). Among the prominent women leaders today — particularly Wan Azizah Wan Ismail who headed Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, People’s Justice Party) during its years in opposition and is now Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister—there is clearly an element of the male-dynastic connection (Derichs 2013).

While studies on women and party politics have persuasively explained how and why women have underperformed in formal politics, attention on women’s politicisation through social activism has shown that besides party politics women can also assert their public roles autonomously through civil society movements, thus eschewing the male-dominated structure that has characterised political parties (Lai 2003). Women political actors can thus be seen as existing within, or between, two political spheres: electoral politics and civil society. While there have been capable and outstanding women leaders in civil society, ranging from those advocating religious causes such as Zainah Anwar of Sisters in Islam (Perlez 2006) to those calling for electoral reform such as Ambiga Sreenevasan and Maria Chin of Bersih (Coalition for Free and Fair Elections) (Kwok 2016), these women leaders did not gain their legitimacy through electoral contests.¹

Women in civil society movements began to engage in formal or electoral politics in 1999, the year they released a manifesto named the Women’s Agenda for Change (WAC) (Lai 2003; Martinez 2003; tan and Ng 2003). This strategy of considering the importance of electoral politics as the basis for women’s empowerment could have succeeded in raising the numerical representation of

¹ Maria Chin stood as an independent candidate under the Pakatan Harapan (PH) ticket in GE14, and is now a Member of Parliament (MP) having won the contest in the parliamentary constituency of Petaling Jaya (Star Online 2018).
women in national and subnational parliaments. In the 1999 General Election, for the first time in the country's history, women comprised more than 10 per cent of elected representatives in national parliament (Tan and Ng 2003, 118). The 1999 General Election also saw the creation of the Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI), a women's platform — as opposed to a political party — that fielded an independent woman contestant, another first. Although an NGO-endorsed candidate, she eventually ran on the ticket of a “friendly” political party. In this instance, the WCI saw itself as bridging women's political participation in party politics and social activism (Lai 2003, 69). Tan Beng Hui and Cecilia Ng see this as a turning point in women's social activism, a “shift from rights to representation, from the arena of informal to formal politics” (2003, 124). Others have referred to this turn in women's activism from civil society to electoral politics as a “definitive development” (Martinez 2003, 75).

During the period of transition to a new order provided by the Reformasi movement in 1999, a broad-based coalition of women's movements ranging from those involved in violence against women to rights of migrant women was able to divert some attention from their core objectives, to engage with the formal political process (Stivens 2003). At this stage of 'political transitioning' gender politics was used to challenge the state but at the same time it was appropriated by the ruling government to act as a bulwark against its own possible defeat in the election of 1999 (Maznah 2002, 217). Indeed, the endorsement of the WAC by about 100 organisations was said to have led to the setting up of the Ministry of Women and Family Development in 1999 and considered to be one of the most direct responses to women's civil society activism (Saliha 2004, 151).

As to whether the post-2008 democratisation climate promised more for women's advancement, a study by Cecilia Ng (2010) on newly elected and appointed women representatives showed that there were many teething problems when women social activists crossed directly into formal politics or when they assumed their positions as elected representatives. Women had greater problems adjusting to their new roles than male activists who became politicians. Politics and political institutions today are still embedded within a gender regime characterised by a culture of masculinity that holds back new politicians, especially new young women politicians. As they make their foray into party politics, women state assemblypersons and local councillors face additional discrimination due to their age and ethnic identity, in addition to intra-party competition (Ng 2010, 333).

tan and Ng emphasised early on that it would not only be fitting but necessary for women to make a direct foray into public office,

> [I]n the long run, women will still need to enter the formal realm to evoke more widespread change. They cannot use their involvement in informal politics to excuse their absence in the formal sphere. Women's groups have been involved in the amendments to and development of new laws and policies to safeguard the interests of women (2003, 111).

Yet, how essential is it for women to enter formal politics for their interests to be represented? How can women's interests or gains be maximised through formal representation? One of the bigger problems of women's rights advocates today is trying to convince the public that both women and men stand to benefit from more equal gender relations in society.
To delve deeper into the issues outlined above, this monograph will cover various aspects of the gender question in Malaysia’s 14th General Election (GE14) held in May 2018. Besides analysing the results of the election, the observations and commentary here are also based on case studies of five states namely Johor, Sabah, Perlis, Penang and Selangor, during the 10-day campaign period before polling day. Selection of these states was purposive based on their political and geographical significance, but limited also by time and resource constraints, and proximity to the researchers. The authors discuss women’s involvement in GE14 and seek to address the issue of women’s underrepresentation in political life by documenting, investigating and evaluating their experiences as they participated, navigated and contested as candidates in these states. In varying degrees, this included how and why they were selected to contest, how they conducted their campaigns, as well as what issues they raised and challenges they encountered while campaigning. The findings and conclusions were derived through a combination of methods: participant observation, in-depth interviews with candidates, news reports and statistical analysis. The fieldwork commenced several weeks ahead of nomination day on 28 April 2018, up to polling day on 9 May 2018, with some interviews conducted post GE14.

The monograph starts with a discussion of the various gender discourses during GE14, and an analysis of the results around women’s political under-representation. This is followed by the case studies of the five states, which try to explain some of the characteristics, factors and motivations behind the selection of women candidates in their respective parties. Several recommendations to improve and accelerate women’s representation in the next GE15 are offered as well in the conclusion.

**Getting more women in GE14: Between wishful thinking and reality**

The opening salvos of the GE14 pre-campaigning period pitted leaders of the two contending coalitions over what they could offer women. Najib Abdul Razak who led the Barisan Nasional (BN) against Mahathir Mohamad of Pakatan Harapan (PH) boasted on the night of 7 April 2018, two weeks before nomination day, that the BN coalition would offer a special ‘gift’ to women. Najib launched the BN Manifesto to great fanfare at a hall in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur filled with thousands of rousing supporters by announcing a list of glorious-sounding platitudes for women:

*The BN wishes to give rise to thousands of successful women professionals in the corporate fields, in the field of public service, in the field of politics and other fields of leadership, in fact we think of women as the backbone of our nation, for the government and for sure the Barisan Nasional too.*

Mahathir at a separate *ceramah* (rally) in Johor, just a few hours after Najib’s address which was beamed live by a television station, responded with this one-upmanship:

*We don’t even say that we want to prioritise women, but our Deputy Prime Minister in waiting… is a woman. We don’t talk, we do, that is the difference.*

Seemingly, both contending coalitions and their leaders were rightfully giving much prominence to women and their interests in the impending general election, given that they comprised 7.3 million voters, or 50.4 per cent of total registered voters in GE14, an increase of 700,000 women voters from

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2 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoKvYxXQfuY>; accessed: 9 August 2018

3 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Mv8oTsgGlS>; accessed: 9 August 2018.
the previous election.⁴

Beyond the generous promises given to women in both the BN and PH manifestos,⁵ women’s participation as candidates in GE14 remained abysmally low, and women’s issues were hardly centre-staged as campaign pitches throughout this period. The numbers represented by women as voters did not translate into voices demanding that their issues be made a key political concern. Even women politicians themselves were circumspect about highlighting issues affecting women as they went about on their campaign rounds. When the Democratic Action Party’s (DAP) Yeo Bee Yin (YBY), now minister for Energy, Green Technology, Science, Climate Change and Environment, was asked about this when she was campaigning in her parliamentary seat of Bakri in Johor, she said:

*Women’s issues are not important in this election, but if I am elected I will surely bring them up. Other issues are more important, like the GST [Goods and Services Tax] (YBY at Batu Bakri, 13 April 2018).*

At the same ceramah, her colleague Teo Nie Ching (TNC) the parliamentary candidate for Kulai and now Deputy Minister of Education concurred with the view that “women’s issues [were] less important” in the campaign:

*Only a handful of women bring up issues that affect them. They don’t see this as a campaign issue (TNC at Batu Bakri, 13 April 2018).*

A few weeks before nomination day, when asked if she had any knowledge or say about how many women will be fielded by her party, Teo replied,

*No, I won’t be able to know how many women will be fielded by DAP as this is a nationwide issue (TNC at Batu Bakri, 13 April 2018).*

Her male colleague and purported strategist for the party, Liew Chin Tong (LCT), when asked if the party will have more women candidates in the GE14 defended the DAP’s strategy of not looking solely at numbers:

*We will definitely have more female MPs, such as Yeo Bee Yin. We have another woman for an MP candidate for Senai. Hannah Yeoh will also be contesting in a parliamentary seat. We will be upgrading them from Adun to MPs. We will definitely have more female MPs this round than the last (LCT at Batu Pahat, 14 April 2018).*

The DAP women candidates as well as their male colleague were likely being realistic about the party’s limited capacity to field a high number of women candidates in GE14. This was unlike politicians from other political parties who were keen to position themselves as championing women’s right to political participation and candidacy.

When the list of candidates were announced on nomination day, there were only 177 women out of...
1,646 contestants (10.8 per cent) for the state seats, while for parliamentary seats, only 75 out of 719 contestants (10.4 per cent) were women. Hence women formed barely 11 per cent of total candidates in GE14 despite the ‘promise’ by all sides to give them their due share of leadership positions. At the parliamentary level there were only three constituencies with women-only contests, and for state seats there were only two constituencies with three-cornered contests involving all women. At the outset then, there would only be five women guaranteed to be elected in GE14, as opposed to the 515 men assured of seats given there were 160 all-male parliamentary contests and 355 all-male state contests.

**The Results**

When the election was over, only 14.4 per cent of elected Members of Parliament (MPs) (Chart 1) and 12.3 per cent of elected state representatives (Ahli Dewan Undangan Negeri, Adun) were women. Further, when PH and its allied party, Warisan of Sabah took control of the Federal government, only five women (19.2 per cent) were appointed as Ministers while another four (17.4 per cent) were made Deputy Ministers (Charts 2 and 3). By all counts the achievement of women in the GE14 was way below the minimum 30 per cent benchmark; in fact, they barely came close to the 20 per cent mark.

**Chart 1: Percentage women Members of Parliament (1955-2018)**

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6 The parliamentary contests involved Seputeh (Federal Territories), Teresa Kok of DAP versus Chan Quin Er of MCA; Kota Tinggi (Johor), Azlinda Abdul Latif of Bersatu versus Halimah Mohd Sadique of UMNO; and Pengerang (Johor), Norliza Ngadiran of Bersatu versus Azalina Othman Said of UMNO.

7 The two three-women state contests were in Tanjong Mas (Kelantan) involving Rohani Ibrahim (Pas), Hafizah Mustakim (Amanah), and Madiah Ab Aziz (UMNO); and Rahang (Negeri Sembilan) where DAP’s Mary Josephine Prittam Singh faced-off against MCA’s Yap Siok Moy and the People’s Alternative Party’s (Pap) Saraswathy Paragazum.

8 Besides the above-mentioned constituencies, 29 other parliament and state seats (10 and 19 respectively) had more than one woman contesting alongside male candidates. The ten parliamentary contests were for Batu Kawan (Penang), Pandan and Petaling Jaya in Selangor, Parit Sulong (Johor), Lanang (Sarawak), Tuaran, Sipitang, Tenom, Batu Sapi, and Tawau, all in Sabah; while the 19 state contests were in Bukit Kayu Hitam (Kedah); Demit (Kelantan); Berapit, Padang Lalang, Bukit Tambun, Sg Pinang, and Batu Lanchang (all in Penang); Buntong and Kampung Gajah (Perak); Teruntum (Pahang); Bukit Antarabangsa, Seri Serdang, Kota Damansara, Sementa (Selangor); Mambau (Negeri Sembilan); Johor Lama and Johor Jaya (Johor); and Pitas and Matunggong (Sabah).
In the parliamentary race, women from DAP and the Sarawak-based Parti Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu (Pbb) fared best, scoring a 100 per cent success rate all of them winning their seats, while 78.6 per cent of PKR women candidates and 66.7 per cent from UMNO also succeeded in becoming MPs. The sole Pas woman who won at this level made up the 10 per cent female share of the party's ten MPs (Chart 4).

With these results, Malaysia inched its way from number 157 in the world ranking of women in national parliaments, up to number 135, although the minimum 30 per cent target — recognised elsewhere in the world as being the critical mass for them to be effective in gendered policy debates — remain elusive.

**In winning seats women performed better**

The argument that there were insufficient competent and accomplished women to choose from as candidates needs reexamination given that proportionately, the PH-Warisan and BN female
candidates as a whole, performed better than their male counterparts. Three-quarters (75 per cent) of the PH-Warisan women who contested succeeded in becoming MPs, while only slightly over half (52.3 per cent) of their male counterparts won. Even for BN candidates, women rather than men, performed better to become MPs (38.5 per cent versus 35.2 per cent). Chart 5 further illustrates this point about a higher proportion of women being elected as compared to their ratio as candidates, versus that of men. Despite comprising only 10.8 per cent of all candidates running for Parliament, 35.0 per cent of women who contested were voted in, compared to 30.2 per cent of men who formed 89.2 per cent of all candidates.

**Chart 5: Percentage candidates contesting and elected by gender as MPs, GE14**

`Women candidates` | `Women elected` | `Men candidates` | `Men elected`
--- | --- | --- | ---
0.00 | 2.50 | 67.50 | 90.00

**Women won and lost on account of their party affiliation**

Mirroring their respective party results, the vote losses by BN women candidates was substantial with their majorities reduced from GE13, and only two parliamentary candidates in Sabah slightly improved on their majorities (Chart 6), while the vote gains by PH women in GE14 increased by wider margins compared to GE13, with only four seats recording net negative losses (Chart 7).

**Chart 6: Parliamentary seats won by BN women - vote gains or losses (GE13 to GE14)**

| Vote margins | Pengerang | Masjid Tanah | Mukah | Batang Lepar | Batang Sadong |
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ---|
| -15000 | -11250 | -7500 | -3750 | 0 | 3750 |
Gender and ethnicity: Almost no connection

The extent of an appreciable swing among Malay voters can be gauged by juxtaposing the seats won by women candidates against the proportion of Malay voters in those constituencies. Chart 8 demonstrates the general correlation between Malay voters and women candidates according to the parties or coalitions which won at the parliamentary level. As can be seen, UMNO and Pas women won in overwhelmingly Malay majority constituencies while the composition of the constituencies in which PH women candidates won was more evenly spread, generally concentrated in the middle, but also achieving success where the proportion of Malay voters was as high as 70 per cent.
What held back the women?

Apart from the poor candidacy rate highlighted earlier, there were other factors that influenced the outcome of women’s representation and performance in GE14. The impact of electoral horse trading, the challenges in getting women’s issues recognised as campaign issues, the sexism that pervaded at various levels, different campaign approaches of women candidates, as well as regional differences — all of which contributed to holding back women politicians from enjoying better electoral results in Malaysia’s historic polls.

Poor candidacy rate

As noted, the reality was that only around 11 per cent of all those contesting parliamentary and state seats at GE14 were women. Just one political party — Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) with its 40 per cent representation from nominating two women among its five parliamentary candidates — was able to achieve the minimum 30 per cent goal. The next best performers at this level, PBB and PKR, only managed to field 28.6 and 20 per cent women contestants respectively. As a whole, women formed a marginal 12.7 per cent of all PH-Warisan parliamentary candidates, while BN had 11.8 per cent. BN minor parties like MyPPP (People’s Progressive Party), PDP (Parti Demokratik Progresi), PPRS (Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah), Upko (United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation), and Ldp (Sabah Liberal Democratic Party) did not field any women to become MPs, or Adun for that matter.

As it turned out too, the number of PH and BN women contesting in GE14 was not that much more than that fielded in GE13 in 2013. BN added just four candidates to its 22 women parliamentary contestants in in the last general election while PKR, DAP and Pas which had 11, 4 and 7 women parliamentary candidates respectively under the Pakatan Rakyat umbrella in GE13, only raised this to 14, 8 and 10 in GE14. As already stated too, just a handful of the contests involved all-women candidates.

Electoral horse-trading and the gender factor

Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah) which fielded only one woman in the parliamentary contest, has no female representative in Federal Government for the next five years as their sole candidate failed to win. While PKR women did better than the men in winning parliamentary seats (78.6 per cent versus 66 per cent), their success rate as Adun was slightly reversed with 51.2 per cent of male candidates winning versus 50 per cent for women. Warisan women state level candidates who won also did poorer (42.9 per cent) than the men (47.4 per cent), but it was the Parti Pribumi

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9 The 11 PKR women who became MPs were Nor Azrina Surip (Merbok, Kedah), Nurul Izzah Anwar (Permatang Pauh, Penang), Fuziah Salleh (Kuantan, Pahang), Leow Hsiad Hui (Hulu Selangor, Selangor), Zuraida Kamaruddin (Ampang, Selangor), Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (Pandan, Selangor), Maria Chin Abdullah (Petaling Jaya, Selangor), Tan Yee Kew (Wangsa Maju, FT), Rusnah Aluai (Tangga Batu, Melaka), Natrah Ismail (Sekijang, Johor), Christina Liew Chin Jin (Tawau, Sabah).

10 This is in contrast to the party’s two women candidates at the parliamentary level, one of whom became an MP, a 50 per cent success rate (versus 46.67 per cent for men). Having lost in 2013 as a PKR candidate, Isnaraissah Munirah Majlis won the Kota Belud seat in Sabah on her second attempt under Warisan, defeating Salleh Said Keruak, former Sabah Chief Minister and Federal Minister.
Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) women running as Adun who performed the worst, leaving them with one woman Adun of the eight women fielded (12.5 per cent) versus 22 Bersatu men who became Adun (23.7 per cent).\textsuperscript{11}

One wonders if Amanah women would have had a different result if the highly competent and experienced two-term incumbent MP for Kota Raja, Siti Mariah Mahmud, had defended her seat instead of making way for party president Mohamad Sabu. Understandably, as party president he needed a safer seat to contest in but it remains curious why none of the Amanah men made way for this to happen. Mohamad Sabu subsequently won and was made Minister of Defence. Had Siti Mariah contested and succeeded in becoming MP again, she not only could have diluted the gender bias of Amanah’s leadership in government, but also allowed her constituents to benefit from having another female representative in the Federal Cabinet. Hers was an example of how the underrepresentation of women as candidates in all political parties in GE14 had wider ramifications which, like its origins, have not been well understood or articulated and instead been hidden under the guise of the lack of “merit”.

**Women’s concerns not a campaign issue**

As admitted by some women candidates earlier, gender issues are still not important in the Malaysian political arena. Seen as more pressing are concerns relating to the economy and corruption. Aspiring women candidates thus needed to raise their visibility and work harder to be noticed by the party hierarchy. First time women candidates in GE14, were particularly challenged to mobilise their own human and financial resources, and hit the ground running the minute they were nominated. They had to be physically visible to their electorate, come up with more creative ideas to win the vote, and in the process, chalked up a punishing schedule throughout the campaign period.

This narrow conceptualisation of women and their issues — how they are regarded and portrayed — has a lot to do with prevailing national discourses on gender. These have not been sufficiently interrogated to uncover and counter processes and structures that promote and perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination. They also do not recognise that different people, women included, have different realities and needs. As such, there is little appreciation of how national policies affect women and men differently, or that a one-size solution cannot apply to everyone. Unless these broader paradigm shifts happen, it would be unrealistic to expect to have ceramah of a higher quality, including where interventions by women draw on their own advocacy experience. In general, women candidates either did not or hardly mentioned such issues (especially policy related ones) altogether, or mainly spoke about women as an important vote bank.

For example, on the ceramah trail in Selangor during GE14, barely any candidates spoke about the importance of gender equality or women’s rights in the new Malaysia that was promised. To be fair, the standard of speeches were generally poor, with many rakyat present expecting ‘entertainment’ or a chance to see their favourite politicians on stage, rather than necessarily deepen their understanding on issues. It was a similar situation in Penang. Chong Eng, the DAP candidate for the

\textsuperscript{11} Bersatu also had only one women MP, Rina Harun, who won the Titiwangsa seat in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. It had fielded three women candidates at the parliamentary level.
state seat of Padang Lalang pointed out that bringing up women's issues would not affect the voting trend as the practice was to vote for the party. People wanted to hear about issues like GST and anti-corruption. There was no point talking about Gender Responsive and Participatory Budgeting, for instance, as people did not understand this, not to mention the difficulties in explaining this topic. For her, it was easier to speak about the proposed EPF contribution for women rather than about gender equality, which was too broad a topic. She also felt that with education and income now, women did not see gender inequality, "You have to break gender equality, women’s work down. If not no one will hear you". Syerleena Abdul Rashid, another DAP candidate for the state seat of Sri Delima agreed that people wanted to be entertained; campaigning was about showmanship and performance so it was better to discuss policies in forums and small kelompok which were more controlled environments and suitable for voter education. In her first two ceramah, she tried to highlight gender by mentioning the unequal representation of women decision makers but quickly realised that the audience was not interested so she changed her strategy to be more personal and connected, and to speak from the heart.

**Sexism in campaigning**

Aside from targets for women's representation that were not met, sexism was rife in the already scant coverage of news reports on contests involving women candidates. For example, the Star newspaper came out with headlines like "Cat fight brewing in Batu Kawan", only because it was a two-cornered fight between two women in this seat. This sexism also appeared to have an ethnocentric dimension to it as the interest and headlines appeared to focus only on the two Indian women contesting, Kasthuri Patto of DAP and Jayanthi Devi of Gerakan, even though the article also referred to another two-cornered contest involving two Chinese women candidates, Goh Swee Ghim of Mca and Heng Lee Lee of DAP in the state seat of Berapit, minus any mention of a ‘cat fight’ between them.

In this context, it was unsurprising that references to women in the GE14 campaign period were largely limited to the travesties of Rosmah Mansor, wife of former Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak. She became the butt of jokes especially by male politicians during the ceramah circuit, although it should also be noted that the more ‘substance’ these men candidates had in their presentations, the less they resorted to highlighting Rosmah’s excesses. ‘Real’ gender issues were rarely brought up during these ceramah. If anything at all it was more in relation to the welfare type programmes for women, or thanking the Briged Wanita (women’s groups set up by the Penang state government) for their support.

If the men candidates brought up gender-related issues, often it was to refer to the physical appearance of women. In Penang, one of them were heard saying that Syerleena was not only smart and efficient but also beautiful and slender looking. Her figure which was attributed to her working hard was contrasted against politicians whose bodies were oversized because they did no work. This male candidate also specifically addressed Muslims in the audience to appeal to them to pick their leaders objectively. In this regard, he argued that being a woman should not limit their ability to be an Adun since Islam permitted women to be elected representatives just like men. He provided the example of Puteri Balqis (likely Ratu Balqis, the Biblical Queen of Sheba) as a woman who was

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a good, competent leader and that good leaders would lead to a prosperous country, since good leadership had little to do with hair, tummies, or jewellery (an apparent reference to Rosmah).

Not all men candidates were sexist though. One who spoke in support of Syerleena described her as a strong and capable candidate, and stated that based on what he knew of her when they were both working for the local council, he could vouch for her ability to improve voters' lives if elected as their representative. He went on to enumerate both what he and Syerleena had accomplished together through the council's Licensing Department, such as shorter wait times and shorter approval periods for a business license. When discussing free rent for vendors in wet markets, he again mentioned Syerleena's role and highlighted her strengths to the audience. In the main the PH candidates in Penang, particularly due to the short time available in ceramah, supported each other but in more general terms.

From the BN side, Wan Azizah as the de facto head of PKR and designated Deputy Prime Minister in the event of a PH victory became a favourite ‘target’ of Malay newspapers. She was frequently portrayed as the “incapable”, “weak” and “directed by powers behind the scene”, figurehead of the party. At one point her photo, instead of Mahathir’s, was posted on social media as the future Prime Minister as a way of sowing doubts and fear among voters that a female leader may be put in place if PH came to power.13

**Gender-differentiated campaign approaches**

While there were some similarities in how campaigns were conducted as a whole, there was also divergence in the way women candidates worked to garner votes, versus what the men did to obtain the same results. For instance, many of the women candidates interviewed felt more comfortable utilising the ‘personal touch’ approach which focused on walkabouts and visits to meet voters in their homes or places like shopping areas and markets as opposed to speaking at ceramah. For first time candidates, their objective was to meet as many people as possible within the short campaign period. One of them stressed the point that she needed her electorate to meet or see her; so she tried very hard by going for daily walkabouts. She also went house-to-house to meet people but soon realised that 60 per cent of people were not at home in the day time so that was not the best strategy. A better approach was going to markets and hawker centres. This preference is understandable given that public events like ceramah have traditionally been dominated by men. For women to get used to these avenues, they would need time to adapt and to pick up different skills.

This difference was evident even when comparing how the more established PKR women candidates performed at ceramah versus those who were newer. The former spoke with greater ease, knew the right buzzwords and phrases to move the crowd, and also had learnt how to highlight the importance of women's issues and appeal to women in the crowd. It should be noted as well that the BN and Pas women candidates in Selangor had a very low public presence during GE14. Presumably they were using the ‘personal touch’ approach behind closed doors, or not campaigning at all.

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For some women candidates, the ‘personal touch’ method was also preferred because they found meeting voters directly a more effective platform. As one put it:

*Ceramah is very formal, people cannot voice out their grievances. This way, they can get a first-hand impression of the candidate, and can voice out their grievances if any. At this stage [of campaigning] people are more concerned about who the candidate is. In fact they asked me, “why so many manifesto?” [laughs]… Also, it is easier to talk to women than men. Women are really happy to be engaged this way with responses like "kalau ada masalah boleh cerita dengan YB [if we have problems we can talk to YB]".

Another female candidate felt that *ceramah* was for people who already supported a party, so even though she was appreciative of this support, she preferred to “*turun padang* [go to the ground]” to meet voters who were fence-sitters, those who would not be coming to *ceramah* and hence could only be reached if she went to them.

**Regional differences and gender inequality**

The discrepancy among the geographical states also needs highlighting to show the unevenness in women’s political representation across the country. Women’s parliamentary candidacy was highest in the Federal Territories (23.7 per cent) followed by Penang (17.0 per cent) and Johor (16.2 per cent). Sabah had the highest number of women running to become MPs (15 women out of all 97 candidates, or 15.5 per cent). Conversely, Perlis, Terengganu and Negri Sembilan had no women candidates at the parliamentary level. Kelantan had just one woman (2.3 per cent) while women were less than 10 per cent of parliamentary candidates in Kedah, Pahang and Perak. Overall, the states with the least number of women contestants — for parliament and state combined — were Terengganu (3.3 per cent), Kelantan (6.0 per cent) and Negeri Sembilan (6.9 per cent).

Johor, with seven women out of 26 MPs (26.9 per cent) was the best performer at this level. Selangor, Sabah and Penang could only muster 18.2 per cent (4 of 22 MPs), 16.0 per cent (4 of 25), and 15.4 per cent (2 of 13) respectively, while Perlis had no women MPs. However, at the state level, Perlis came out on top with four women among its 15 Adun (26.7 per cent), followed by Selangor 21.4 per cent (12 of 56 Adun). The others — Johor (16.1 per cent, 9 of 56), Penang (15.0 per cent, 6 of 40) and Sabah (13.3 per cent, 8 of 60) — were less impressive especially in terms of absolute numbers (See Tables 1 and 2).

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 1: Women MPs elected (selected states) (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Johor</td>
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Table 2: Women state representatives elected (selected states) (%)

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<th>State</th>
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<tr>
<td>Perlis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Selangor</td>
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<td>Johor</td>
<td>16.1</td>
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<td>Penang</td>
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<td>Sabah</td>
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In absolute terms, Johor led with the most number of women MPs (seven), followed by Sarawak (five), and Selangor, Federal Territories and Sabah (four each), but proportionately, the Federal Territories and Melaka (33.3 per cent), and Johor (26.9 per cent) had the highest representation (Chart 9).

Chart 9: Members of Parliament by gender and state, GE14

It is worth noting that while more women from smaller parties also joined the GE14 fray, the overwhelming majority of female candidates (218 or 86.5 per cent) came from parties in PH and BN. The three women who ran as independent candidates failed to win any seat and lost their deposits. Most, if not all, encountered the same kind of experience as their female counterparts from the established political parties, although independent candidates were doubly disadvantaged without any party machinery. Lacking the resources and backing of larger machinery, women who wish to contest in Malaysia’s national polls have a slim chance of being fielded, and an even slimmer chance of winning.

The cascading effect of underrepresentation

The low number of women candidates fielded in turn impacted on their representation in the Federal Cabinet and State Executive Committees (Ex-Co). One of the promises PH made in its GE14 Manifesto, the Buku Harapan, was ensuring that women comprised at least 30 per cent of policymakers. Given this, it is noteworthy that the newly-minted government did not meet this goal via the first opportunity it was presented with: the appointments to the Federal Cabinet and State Ex-Co.

14 In Sabah, the State Executive Committee is called the Cabinet.
15 The Buku Harapan noted under subsection 5(2) of its “Special Commitment for Women” that the coalition would ensure “at least 30 per cent of policy makers are women” (2018, 140) if it won.
As noted previously, instead of the Federal level, only five women (19.2 percent) were appointed as Ministers. Another four (17.4 percent) were made Deputy Ministers. The disproportionately lower number of women elected as Adun as compared to men for every state (Chart 10) also led to a cascading effect of women’s political underrepresentation. The ‘best’ performers, Perlis and Selangor, appointed three women Adun each (27.3 per cent) to the 11-member State Ex-Co, while Kedah had two women in its Ex-Co (18.2 per cent). This, however, was still below the minimum 30 per cent mark. Worse, Terengganu had zero women in the state’s highest decision-making body resulting in a male Ex-Co overseeing women’s affairs — while the remaining states managed the bare minimum with each appointing only one token woman.

One consequence of not having more women Ex-Co members was the increased likelihood of single female appointees automatically being tasked with the women’s portfolio, usually in combination with family development and welfare. Only Sabah, whose female Ex-Co member, Christina Liew was made Deputy Chief Minister and held the Tourism, Culture and Environment portfolio, was different. Otherwise, all the states with sole women Ex-Co members pigeon-holed them into taking on women’s affairs, thus perpetuating the stereotype that women political leaders could not manage anything different or more than this.

However, the case of Perlis, Kedah, Selangor and Sabah demonstrates that this is far from true. All went beyond and took women out of the box by giving them portfolios ranging from poverty alleviation, housing and rural development to education, human resource development and science and technological innovation. Besides pushing the boundaries of what is traditionally associated

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16 In November 2018, six months after GE14, the Terengganu Government appointed a woman onto the State Legislative Assembly making her the sole female representative at this level. According to the State Constitution, the government is allowed to appoint up to four additional Adun if there are no women or non-Muslim representatives in the legislative assembly (See The Star Online (2018), “First woman assemblyman in Terengganu”, 3 December, <https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2018/12/03/first-woman-assemblyman-in-terengganu/> , accessed: 30 November 2018).

17 The responsibility for women’s affairs was entrusted to the State Minister of Health and People’s Well-Being, Stephen Wong.
as women's work, Perlis and Kedah were exemplary in appointing all their female Adun into their Ex-Co. On the other hand, Johor with four women Adun, and Penang and Sabah with five women Adun each, could have fulfilled the minimum 30 per cent target but did not maximise on these numbers opting instead to keep to the bare minimum of one woman in their respective Ex-Co. Likewise, Selangor with 11 female PH Adun to pick from, could have set a good precedent by appointing four women Ex-Co members as it had done under former Chief Minister Khalid Ibrahim’s tenure (2008-2013). The fact that it did not, nor did it consider three experienced and well qualified third-term women Adun — Elizabeth Wong, Rodziah Ismail, Haniza Talha18 — as potential replacements for the Chief Minister's post, showed that it was far from being a leading state for gender reforms.

**Women’s Candidacy in GE14: Features and selection factors in five states**

The experience and trajectory of selected women's candidates from five states were also examined for this study - Johor, Sabah, Penang, Perlis, and Selangor. The results of these case studies are presented below.

**Johor: More diverse route to women’s candidacy**

In Johor the backgrounds of all the women candidates were mixed in nature; most were not nominated due to family connections, but some were from families with a strong grip on the party in certain constituencies. Party dynamics played a very important role in determining the success of women’s candidacy in elections in this state. In UMNO, internal competition and power placement strongly influenced how candidates were selected as contestants. The first battle line was to secure leadership positions within the party hierarchy, the topmost being its Supreme Council, then headship at the state level, division level, and finally at the branch level. Having leadership positions within the party’s Youth (Pemuda), Women (Wanita) and Young Women (Puteri) wings were additional influences on how one's candidacy was decided. Besides these formal structures there could also be informal power nexus wielded by locally-based ‘warlords’. Being fielded as an UMNO candidate in Johor had traditionally been a high-stakes competition because the chances of getting elected were almost guaranteed in a majority of the seats here. However, GE14 saw the Malay ground shift, and though not in a huge way, this was enough to deliver a first and historic turnover in the state government.

Pas, contesting in the most number of seats in its history, was prepared to field candidates in any constituency without having much regard for winning. Due to this more women were also fielded by the party. The two state seat candidates in Johor had very little probability of success but their selection was justified on the basis of promoting Islam and its values rather than securing electoral seats.

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In the case of DAP, the two women candidates interviewed were not first-timers. One had been elected to office for two terms while the other had previously been an Adun. They were both high profile and well-known having graduated from Adun to MP, in line with DAP’s reform platform. This included incorporating elements of inclusiveness by shifting away from a ‘Chinese-male-traditionalist’ and ‘Chinese-chauvinist’ image. The party’s women’s campaign strategies were very different from Wanita UMNO. Unlike Wanita UMNO who engaged in social bonding and personalised actions with their rural constituency, DAP’s overwhelmingly urban voter base meant that it could not utilise the same approach. Having a Malay woman candidate such as Young Syefura Othman, or popularly known as Rara, giving speeches to a predominantly Chinese electorate helped to chip away at the ‘Chinese chauvinist’ stereotype of the party, even if there were moments of awkwardness in the campaign with this method. Rara’s prominence in the sea of a Chinese audience seemed to be an effective method to make small changes within the party.

The newest party Bersatu fielded two first-time candidates in the all-women, two-cornered parliamentary contests. These seats were considered one of the safest for UMNO having a majority of more than 80 per cent Malay voters and ensconced within the Felda belts, its traditional stronghold. As Bersatu was a new party, its women candidates did not really have to compete internally to be fielded. What counted in the party’s selection process in Johor was its candidates being professionals and in the case of one of them, a local and a second-generation Felda settler. This made her adept at representing local experiences and grievances. Nevertheless, the campaign resources of these Bersatu women were no match against their competitors, ‘heavyweights’ within the Johor UMNO hierarchy.

The case of Haliza Abdullah an UMNO candidate who stood in the parliamentary seat of Batu Gajah illustrates how women candidates were subjected to the whims of their party. In this case, a last minute decision by the UMNO the national central leadership saw her being placed in a constituency where she had not worked in. Ostensibly, this was to prevent another male candidate, Mohd Puad Zarkashi who had previously run in the 2013 election (GE13) and lost, from contesting again. Puad was the Batu Pahat MP for one term after the 2008 GE, and prior to GE14, he had been an UMNO Supreme Council member and Director-General of the Special Affairs Division of the Prime Minister’s Department (Jasa). Although not named in the news report, Haliza was berated by Puad as “a candidate who [was] having moral issues” after he failed in his bid to be selected to contest in GE14. Haliza herself admitted that she was implicated in a khalwat (close proximity) case in 2011 but that she had not been charged. Attacking a female candidate on grounds of her ‘morals’ seemed to be a convenient tactic for Puad to discredit the central leadership’s decision to drop him as a candidate. Haliza believed that she was a scapegoat in the tussle among the ‘strongmen’ in the party. Gossip about her being caught for khalwat with an unmarried man made the rounds among ordinary people on the street, helped no less by its circulation on social media. During an informal chat at a coffee shop in Batu Pahat, a non-Malay man casually mentioned about “the lady” with some “moral issues” to the team members of the Johor study.

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Yeo Bee Yin who contested in the Bakri constituency in Johor easily won in this mixed constituency (44 per cent Malay, 53 per cent Chinese, two per cent Indians and one per cent ‘Others’ registered voters) but agreed that the party structure prevented more women from being nominated:

Women find it difficult to be nominated as candidates because of [the] party structure and patron-client relationship. But in UMNO it is even more difficult than in DAP. Largely because DAP does not have much money. In the states of Penang and Selangor things may be changing as there are lots of money involved at the division level (YBY at Batu Bakri, 13 April 2018).

She added that in DAP, the leadership was contemplating dispensing with elections at the division level by having only elected MPs as the Division Head. In constituencies without elected MPs, their Division Heads may be appointed from the top. Although this was top-down in approach, she believed that it might prevent excessive politicizing within the party.

In many cases women cannot depend on the leadership of their party’s women’s wings to claim their right to candidacy nomination. According to a former Puteri UMNO committee member who worked at one of the UMNO offices in Johor, women often needed to by-pass ‘wing’ (sayap) politics to be strong and unassailable in their bid to contest. For example, two women members in Johor, Halimah Sadique and Azalina Othman succeeded in being multiple-term lawmakers with hardly any contenders from within the party because they were Division Heads. Halimah Sadique was first Adun for three terms, and MP for three subsequent terms including GE14 where she won in the Kota Tinggi parliamentary seat. In all of these, from 1995 till 2014, she obtained more than 75 per cent of the votes. In GE14 though, her popularity fell to 69 per cent in a constituency with 88 per cent Malay voters, nine per cent Chinese, two per cent Indian and one per cent ‘Others’.

Azalina Othman Said started her rise in UMNO by heading Puteri UMNO, the party’s Young Women’s Wing which she formed in 2001. She later contested in the Pengerang parliamentary seat and won unopposed in two general elections, 2004 and 2008. In 2013 she faced a three-cornered contest and won with 84 per cent of the votes. In GE14, she faced Norliza Ngadiman from Bersatu. Although she won, Azalina’s vote share fell to 68 per cent, a drop of 16 per cent from GE13, a significant result in this overwhelmingly Malay majority area — with 90 per cent Malay voters — and a known Felda stronghold.

Another candidate who did not go through the Wanita UMNO route was Rashidah Ismail who contested in the state seat of Pasir Raja, part of the parliamentary constituency of Tenggara. Rashidah did not hold any position in the women’s wing nor was she a party Division Head. Instead, she was supposedly handpicked by the male parliamentary candidate Adham Baba who had previously contested for the Pasir Raja state seat in GE13 and won, before being promoted to contest in the parliamentary seat of Tenggara in GE14. His actions were akin to bequeathing his personal seat to Rashidah while he himself moved up to the parliamentary seat. Rashidah won with 52 per cent of the vote, down from the 66 per cent Adham obtained in GE13. This state seat comprised 70 per cent Malay, 19 per cent Chinese, eight per cent Indian, and four per cent ‘Others’ as voters.

**Sabah: Family connections as an advantage for female candidacy**

Sabah, among the least developed of states in Malaysia, saw the highest number of women — 41 in total — contesting at both levels of legislature, even though proportionately, they formed only
11.8 per cent of the state's total number of candidates in GE14, less than Selangor. In Sabah there was much restlessness among the candidates and voters during pre-polling day likely due to the difficulties in predicting the outcome. As it turned out, GE14 saw an eventual shift of power in the state. Some of the reasons for this were similar to that for the rest of the nation, but there were also issues specific to the state itself. Economic concerns found the most resonance, with the then opposition emphasising 'federal' issues like the GST, rising cost of living, migrant labour, shrinking GDP and corruption as the main issues while campaigning. Equally salient was Sabah's position as the 'peripheral' state of Malaysia and therefore in need of severance from the umbilical cord of the semenanajung (peninsula). UMNO was considered an outsider's party, a sentiment which played out strongly in the state in GE14.

All the women candidates interviewed in Sabah were initiated into politics through family connections or came from families with prior involvement in electoral politics and could be classified as second-generation political candidates. They also possessed degrees in higher education and two were in professional practice, namely law and dentistry. As Sabah's ethnic, sub-ethnic, linguistic and religious groupings are also more diverse than in the peninsula, the shift in loyalty (to party or candidate) can be extremely fluid and frequent. This explains how two women candidates who contested for the first-time were able to secure their seats with a huge and comfortable margin, on top of the overwhelming sentiment or wave of change. About a week before nomination day on 28 April 2018, the media was already abuzz about the inter-generational political baton-passing among at least eight candidates in the state. All four women candidates interviewed came from families with strong political history. Two of them, Jainab Ahmad Ayid and Pamela Yong were from BN and two others, Jannie and Jenifer Lasimbang were from DAP and Warisan respectively.

Jainab Ahmad Ayid, State Minister of Community Development and Consumer Affairs under the previous BN government was contesting for the state seat of Karambunai. She entered politics because of a succession of male patrons who handpicked her to join and be active in UMNO. She was elected the Wanita head of Sepanggar and later contested in a newly-created state seat of Karambunai in the Sepanggar parliamentary constituency. Jainab held this state seat of Sepanggar for three terms until GE14 when she lost to her contender from Warisan and her vote share fell by almost half (from 64 per cent in 2013 to 34 per cent in 2018). Perhaps the complacency of being offered the seat, without much internal competition, all this while made her less able to defend it, what with the added problem of what she called the "internal disaffection within UMNO" where there were rumblings of wanting an orang baru (new person) to contest in her seat. She also shared that her inability to fully engage with the diverse ethnicities of her constituents during the campaign period, despite the seat being a Muslim-majority one, may have disadvantaged her. Her constituents comprised people of Bajau, Suluk, and Bugis origins amongst a host of other linguistic groups. Jainab lamented that although she was of Malay, Arab, Javanese and Bruneian descent she could only speak Malay and English, pointing to some disadvantage in connecting to some of her voters. She exemplified the female candidate who was scouted and handpicked to lead the state UMNO Women's Wing because of her qualifications as a lawyer, family political connection and male

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mentors within the party. However, when the reformasi (reform) or ubah (change) wave swept the state, all these previously advantageous factors did not help her retain her seat.

Pamela Yong, Sabah Mca Women's Chief and Women's Chief for Kota Kinabalu, contested in the state seat of Luyang. A dentist with her own clinic, she was also a mother of four and still nursing her newborn child during the campaign period. Her mother, Agnes Shim was once Mca Women's Chief in Sabah, a former senator and the first female candidate to contest (but lost) in Luyang in 2013. Pamela, 42, was a first-time candidate in this constituency with 76 per cent majority Chinese voters, 19 per cent Indians, and the remainder Malay and 'Other' voters. Her opponents were two male candidates from DAP and SAPP (Sabah Progressive Party). The DAP candidate won capturing 84 per cent of the votes. Pamela had initially rejected the candidacy but the Mca president personally told her, "the party needs you", so she conceded just before nomination day.

Some Mca members had expressed reservations about her candidacy given her low command of Chinese but this was not an issue for her. Instead, she said Mca was already in a dire state, as in “die die already”, hence there was “no harm” in trying a new way with her candidacy. In her experience too, voters were gentler with female than male Mca candidates, and she had yet to experience any hostility. Where the BN leaders had gone wrong was failing to cultivate successors, younger people for the rejuvenation of party. Mca was viewed as male dominated with members having traditional views about Chinese education and ethnicity. However, she also thought that the leadership was now aware of the need for younger female politicians and thus was fielding many young women in GE14, with six women being fielded. Responding to comments about joining the wrong party, she conceded that she was an “underdog instead of riding or depending on BN for electoral success.” Nevertheless, she believed she had the courage to contest despite Luyang being an opposition stronghold.

Two candidates with political family connections were sisters, Jannie Lasimbang and Jenifer Lasimbang. Both contested at the state level, Jannie in Kapayan and Jenifer in Moyog. The two seats are under the parliamentary seat of Penampang, whose candidate was their cousin, Darrell Leiking. The brother of the Lasimbang sisters, Philip used to be the BN assemblyman for Moyog as well as the MP for Penampang. In GE14, the Lasimbang sisters and their cousin Darell Leiking all won their contests. Subsequently, Leiking was made the Federal Minister for International Trade, while Jannie and Jenifer were appointed to the Sabah state cabinet as Assistant Minister of Law and Native Affairs and Assistant Minister for Education and Innovation respectively.

Jannie's constituency of Kepayan is a semi-urban area with a mixed voter composition; eight per cent Malays, 50 per cent Chinese, 39 per cent non-Muslim bumiputera and three per cent 'Others'. Jannie was previously an NGO activist for more than 30 years and a Commissioner of Suhakam (National Human Rights Commission of Malaysia), before becoming the DAP Sabah Women's Chief. In 2006 she was actively involved in and a leader of the Bersih movement. When interviewed, Jannie claimed that the BN government had no political will to implement changes and this led her to join DAP in June 2017. She was only one of two DAP women candidates out of the overall ten seats the party contested in the state, and had an all-woman political machinery (jentera) to canvass voters from

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door to door in the constituency. This jentera also acted as tentacles to gauge political sentiments on the ground. In addition she believed that it provided a human touch for voters to feel connected to their candidate, an aspect especially important for women voters.

Jannie also ensured that her jentera reached out to younger voters since the latter were not ceramah-goers. She focused on raising issues around adat (customs), people with disabilities, and having recreational spaces for youths (for example, futsal grounds). She considered herself fortunate at having been acquitted from a Bersih-related court case a few days prior to nominations, besides the case itself providing her with tremendous publicity. Her ceramah were well attended, and despite the large funds used by BN to sway voters, people still expressed support for Warisan during their house-to-house visits. At the time of being interviewed Jannie expressed more confidence in winning as compared to her sister, since her seat was in a semi-urban area where people were more inclined towards voting opposition. She acknowledged that being new to politics, she was unfamiliar with handling internal party dynamics and as such felt less inclined to be overly involved in it.

Jennifer Lasimbang on the other hand contested in the rural state seat of Moyog. The composition of voters here comprised three per cent Malays (Muslim bumiputera), eight per cent Chinese, 87 percent non-Muslim bumiputera, and one per cent ‘Others’. Jenifer was a former computer engineer at a local Sabah university, and advocates for the rights of indigenous people. She was initially a member of PKR which she joined in 2009 through her cousin Darell. Technically she is a member of PKR but in GE14 Jenifer contested under the Warisan ticket. The fluidity of Sabah politics is such that Jenifer confessed to having two sets of surat watikah — letter of credentials which are needed as proof of nomination — from both the presidents of PKR and Warisan on nomination day. She chose to contest under Warisan, given that the party was considered a local party and was fast gaining support. Her cousin Leiking had already switched affiliation from PKR to Warisan and was its deputy president. Even though her state seat was located within the same parliamentary constituency as Jannie’s, the demographics between them differed considerably as mentioned, with one being semi-urban and the other, rural. Consequently, the Lasimbang sisters rarely campaigned together. Jenifer’s focus was on land issues, and she communicated with her constituents largely in her native Kadazan language.

Penang and Perlis: Why and how were women candidates selected?

Penang only fielded 24 women (12.6 per cent) out of a total of 189 candidates who contested in the state; 17 per cent for Parliament and 11 per cent for the State Assembly. Thus it was no surprise that the final results was a mere 15 per cent for both women parliamentarians and state assembly persons respectively. In contrast, Perlis fielded eight women at the state level, out of which four (26.6 per cent) won, the closest to the minimum proportion pushed by women’s rights advocates. However, it had no women parliamentary candidates.

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24 We would like to thank Yap Li Yan in documenting the speeches of the candidates (besides those interviewed) during their respective ceramah circuits.
Six women candidates were selected to attempt to understand why and how they were selected, five in Penang and one in Perlis. Four were first time contenders; two were experienced candidates. Five stood in state seats while the sixth was in a parliamentary constituency. The first timers interviewed were:

1) Heng Lee Lee (DAP) stood in the state seat of Berapit with a total electorate of 23,779 voters (Malays four per cent, Chinese 85 per cent and Indians 10 per cent). She faced three other contenders from Mca, Penang Front Party (Pfp) and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Prm). Lee Lee won with 18,378 votes and by a handsome margin of 16,981 votes.

2) Syerleena Abdul Rashid (DAP) contested in Seri Delima, a predominantly Chinese state level constituency with 25,232 voters (Malays 22 per cent, Chinese 66 per cent, Indians 11 per cent and ‘Others’ one per cent). She obtained 16,553 votes, winning by a majority of 13,211 votes.

3) Gan Ay Ling (PKR) stood in the mixed state constituency of Indera Kayangan which had an electorate of 11,018 voters (Malays 51 per cent, Chinese 44 per cent, Indians four per cent and ‘Others’ two per cent). She obtained 5,023 votes and won by a majority of 3,177 votes.

4) Peggie Koo Pei Chee (Gerakan) running for the Bukit Lancang state seat, an overwhelmingly Chinese constituency of 27,448 voters (Malays seven per cent, Chinese 86 per cent, Indians six per cent and ‘Others’ one per cent). She lost to a DAP candidate whose votes were almost ten times the 2,407 votes she obtained, a performance far worse than her predecessor and causing her to lose her deposit.

The experienced candidates were:

1) Chong Eng (DAP) who defended her predominantly Chinese constituency of Padang Lalong with a total electorate of 27,959 (11 per cent Malays, 81 per cent Chinese, eight per cent Indians). The other contestants were from Mca, Prm and Pfp. She garnered 20,764 votes winning by a huge majority of 18,364 votes.

2) Nurul Izzah (PKR), who contested for the first time in Permatang Pauh taking over the parliamentary constituency from her mother Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. The majority of the 81,789 voters were Malays (72 per cent) while 21 per cent were Chinese and six per cent Indians. She won with 35,534 votes and a majority of 15,668 votes to defeat her BN and Pas opponents.25

There appeared to be a standard process for DAP candidates in Penang to be nominated. First, branches would submit names of their nominees to the state election committee; in Penang, this committee comprised five men. Shortlisted candidates were interviewed at the state level before a list of names went before the three-man central selection committee at the national level, for a final decision. It was possible for others (for example, the Youth or Women’s wings, or the Parliamentary Liaison Committee) to put forward their candidates as well. Syerleena herself, for instance, was nominated through the Parliamentary Liaison Committee. However, the initial nomination phase was dominated by the party’s branches.

25 The researcher did not manage to speak with Nurul Izzah but followed a couple of her ceramahs where she was basically given rock star status.
All the first timers were already interested in politics in their youth and later volunteered in party activities. Except for Lee Lee, three of the others were groomed for political office where two of them (Syerleena and Ay Ling) were councillors, a typical route to a political career. Syerleena in particular was showcased as DAP being more multi-ethnic (read, Malay), and more accepting of Malays into its ranks, while Peggie was asked to be the Batu Lancang coordinator from as early as 2017. Having influential mentors, inevitably men, at the top of the party hierarchy was also an important factor for Syerleena, Peggie and Ay Ling. As for Lee Lee, her position as Special Officer to the then Chief Minister was important in pushing her candidature as she had little other prior experience in DAP. Likely she was good in her job and shown herself to be competent enough to be selected. The outlier was Ay Ling who was set to contest on the island but was shunted to Perlis a week before nomination day. Her name had been on the candidate list from as early as the last quarter of 2017 when the national-level PKR women's wing nominated her. Her parachute move to Indera Kayangan was said to be due to an intra-party struggle between two opposing camps in PKR, which also affected other candidates in the party as noted earlier. As for Chong Eng and Nurul Izzah, their renomination was a foregone conclusion given the positions they held in their parties. Possibly, due to the uncertainty around her incumbent seat of Lembah Pantai, Nurul was sent to the safer family seat in Permatang Pauh. Chong Eng, a Penang Ex-Co for Women, Family and Community Development, has generally done a good job in her constituency and in the state government, including keeping to the party line.

The Penang case study confirmed that besides a party's own nomination process, there are several significant factors to be considered, especially for women, what more a first timer, to be selected. Firstly, some basic political experience is needed for one to be recognised. Once candidates proved their mettle, usually by volunteering in party activities, they would then be selected to sit in more visible positions such as councillors, or coordinators in a constituency, or given important positions in the party. A second consideration is the nature of the party patron-client relationship where close proximity to political (particularly male) mentors was important. These mentors would then prepare them for particular positions. Intra-party struggles and contestations are also a determining factor as in the case of Ay Ling where the male candidate who replaced her in her original seat appeared to have the necessary resources and connections. In DAP, another key reason already noted was the party's desire to project a multiethnic image to the public, particularly when it had been criticised for being too Chinese. Hence its selection of Syerleena, whose articulateness and intelligence were an asset, but so too was her 'Malay' identity.

At the end of the day, questions still remain regarding the overall low representation of women in electoral politics. Despite the calls for more women's representation, Chong Eng pointed out that gender was not a consideration in deciding who would stand, "thus one needed to lobby earlier and make women visible; their competencies needed to be seen". Besides the fact that gender had not been mainstreamed in DAP, she also felt that women were not sophisticated and good enough, and that they needed to have some standards. She herself used to be more vocal and aggressive in pushing for women candidates like Zuraida Kamaruddin, PKR women's chief was during GE14, but now she allowed the process to take its course. Despite her seniority and position as women's chief in the party, she said that she had "no power, and no money" and did not have any say in the selection of candidates. There was once, however, when she did lobby for a woman candidate, but in the end, the latter "pulled her down", thus making her "look bad". She emphasised that women are a minority in the party and that:
[The] whole game has been with men for so long. Women are not in the mainstream. We need an enabling environment for women to succeed, for an increase in women’s representation. We need to push the men, push the grassroots and make women understand, to increase their awareness (CE, Penang, 16 May).

Chong Eng added that women also had to show that they were winnable candidates:

*Take this particular seat for example. In the end they chose a man as he has more chance to win. It was a compromise. The woman candidate has not shown herself to be a winnable candidate; she has a small worldview – not as big as the men.*

Similarly, Syerleena voiced that there were not a lot of women interested or enthusiastic in politics as a career choice, noting that there were many cultural barriers; for example, their husbands did not give them permission to do so or because “most talents leave Penang while the middle-class women who are wonderful, join NGOs, and are not interested in politics”. At the same time, she felt that DAP did not seem to have any strategic plan to advance women in decision-making or politics. While Lee Lee agreed that it was important to increase women’s representation, and that there were many opportunities, she noted that women and men were different. While men want to fight and are harsh, “women are more soft and peaceful”. She added that as women got pregnant and had the primary care role of the family, men had to help to create and support the conditions for women to come forward.

Ay Ling partly agreed that women candidates needed the blessings of male leaders to be a candidate, but for her peer-to-peer support was also important. This meant that the local party’s women’s wing needed to be supportive as well. Nonetheless she was grateful that PKR women’s head Zuraida had pushed for the 30 per cent minimum quota for women nominees, creating many opportunities for women. She also believed that it was “up to the women candidates to take the opportunity, to be responsible, to have the right attitude and take ownership”. She acknowledged, like many others that a lot of women did not enter politics due to a lack of support from their husbands and family. She stressed that women could perform equally well as men but they stopped after a while as their husbands often demanded it. She herself had a very supportive husband, recognising the importance of having the understanding of husbands and family members. In Peggie’s case, she believed that that there was no discrimination against women in Gerakan. In fact, she felt she had been treated in a ‘special’ way, frequently featuring in the media and ever present at the press conferences of the Gerakan chief and BN chair of Penang. Despite this, she felt that women needed to work harder to be visible, agreeing with her political peers that as a woman, “I have to do double work. I don’t know how to play power politics”. She had a male mentor, and was viewed as having potential politically, but believed she still needed to continue to work hard and to have long term strategies.

**Selangor: Persisting barriers in Malaysia’s premier state**

As the nation’s premier state, Selangor’s failure to shine by fielding more rather than less women candidates, was a missed opportunity to pave a greater pathway for female representation at the highest levels of decision-making in the country. In terms of the overall proportion of women candidates in a state, it came in third at 13.6 per cent — after Perlis, 14.6 per cent and Johor 13.8 per cent — with its eight women contestants at the national level, and 28 in state contests. Like other women contestants across the nation, those in Selangor were denied a better outcome in GE14 due to their underrepresentation as candidates. Despite this bias, 16 women candidates in this state
emerged triumphant in GE14: four elected as representatives in Parliament (i.e. 18.2 per cent of 22 MPs in the state) and 12 into the State Legislative Assembly (21.4 per cent of 56 Adun), the latter being the highest absolute number of female Adun among all states.

All of PH’s women parliamentary candidates won with increased majorities; Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (Pandan, 75.5 per cent of votes cast), Zuraida Kamaruddin (Ampang, 70.9 per cent), Maria Chin Abdullah (Petaling Jaya, 68.5 per cent), and Leow Hsiad Hui (Hulu Selangor, 47.9 per cent). All except Leow Hsiad Hui had run in ‘safe’ seats. In her case, the incumbent and former Deputy Minister of Education was her main opponent who had won by 3,400 votes in GE13. Further, after the Election Commission’s redelineation exercise, the constituency turned from being ethnically mixed to one with 61 per cent Malay voters (versus 56 per cent in GE13), making it harder for her to win. Despite this, she prevailed albeit with the smallest margin out of the four PKR women parliamentary candidates.

At the state level, the top four winners were Jamaliah Jamaluddin (Bandar Utama, DAP), Lim Yi Wei (Kampung Tunku, DAP), Michele Ng Mei Sze (Subang Jaya, DAP), and Elizabeth Wong Keat Ping (Bukit Lanjan, PKR). Registering landslide victories, Jamaliah garnered the highest proportion of votes, 90.5 per cent, up from the 84.0 per cent won by the previous DAP incumbent, while the other three increased the share of ballots cast to 89.5, 88.3 and 86.4 per cent respectively. These constituencies were overwhelmingly non-Malay. There were mixed fortunes in the predominantly Malay constituencies. As expected, here the contest for PKR and Amanah candidates versus the (mostly male) UMNO or PAS opponents was tighter. Hence, while three of the PKR women managed to increase their share of votes, the percentage gains were small, ranging from 0.03 per cent in Permatang (Rozana Zainal Abidin, PKR) to 5.9 per cent in Batu Tiga (Rodziah Ismail, PKR). Juwairiya Zulkifli, who contested in Bukit Melawati, a constituency with 62 per cent Malay voters, 15 per cent Chinese and 22 per cent Indian voters, also saw PKR’s share of votes rise slightly from 46.0 per cent in GE13 to 48.8 per cent in GE14. The remaining three women contesting in Malay-majority constituencies — Seri Serdang (Siti Mariah Mahmud, Amanah), Lembah Jaya (Haniza Mohamed Talha, PKR), and Sementa (Daroyah Alwi, PKR) — all won with a smaller share of the vote, the biggest loss being in Sementa where the percentage of votes garnered by the incumbent candidate shrank from 60.0 per cent to 46.8 per cent. DAP’s Lee Kee Hiong who contested in Kuala Kubu Baru, the only ethnically-mixed seat in Selangor in which a woman candidate won, saw her share of votes rise from 52.0 per cent to 57.85 per cent. She was also the incumbent for this seat, having won it for the first time in 2013. In contrast, the sole BN woman state contestant who won, Rosni Sohar, incumbent for Hulu Bernam, gained 43.4 per cent of the votes versus 58 per cent in GE13; with a paper-thin majority of 20 votes. None of the nine Pas women candidates were successful in their bids.

**Why so few women?**

The small number of Selangor women candidates reflected the selection process of all the parties, which appeared deficient in transparency, accountability, planning and communication with potential women candidates. This left them not knowing the outcomes of their party’s nominations, or with little time or recourse to appeal its decisions. Having greater clarity in what the selection criteria and process for candidates are, along with broader promotion of these to all party members, would thus have improved this experience for all seeking to contest in GE14, including women. The
distribution of seats ought also to have been better planned and timely, rather than what occurred with last minute changes.

Unlike male candidates who generally have more resources at their disposal and can use this in their election campaigns, even in new constituencies, women who want to successfully contest count on being fielded in areas in which they have done groundwork, engaging with the constituents, and acquiring local trust, knowledge and credibility. Without advance knowledge of the electorate they will contest in or being placed in unfamiliar constituencies, pose substantial disadvantages. This situation appeared to be the case where PKR was concerned, given the lack of transparency around its GE14 selection process and how supposedly agreed upon terms for selection were not observed in the end. As one woman candidate interviewed explained, after GE13 the then PKR Election Director had announced that all future general election candidates would be selected based on their KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). Taking their cue from this, the women’s wing ‘Wanita Keadilan’ told members interested in putting themselves forward as candidates to systematically collate their achievements into reports for this review and selection process. However, when GE14 was announced, the Election Director apparently bypassed these reports, with the basis of selection for candidates unclear but seemingly at the expense of women in the party.

PKR women’s chief, Zuraida Kamaruddin, acknowledged the challenges of women attaining the minimum 30 per cent quota. The formation of PH — which saw the party collaborate with DAP, Bersatu and Amanah — led to PKR conceding some seats to other component members, and in the process confirmed the party’s priorities:

Apa yang buat saya susah hati kerana kerusi-kerusi yang terpaksa diberi kepada kerusi komponen adalah kerusi-kerusi wanita (What troubled me was the seats that had to be given to the component [parties] were women’s seats).26

Without any mechanism to hold the party machinery to account, the handing over of seats earmarked for women occurred without any explanation or justification. This lack of transparency in party selection processes remains a convenient way to obscure the inevitable ‘horse trading’ that takes place behind closed doors or sometimes, overtly. This results in a great deal of uncertainty for credentialed and engaged members wanting to contest, and works instead to the benefit of those ‘connected’ — in the majority of instances, men — to the ultimate decision-makers. The unexplained and delayed unveiling of PKR’s Selangor candidate list by party president Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, when revealed, had a number of surprises, primarily due to last-minute changes and ‘trades’.

It is not clear and therefore difficult to quantify how many ‘deserving’ potential male candidates missed out as a result of eleventh hour deals or concessions. However, some ‘deserving’ women party members found themselves dropped or left to canvass in seats that were not part of previous agreements. At least two who were expecting to contest as parliamentary candidates subsequently ran in seats in the less highly regarded State Legislative Assembly, while another seasoned female PKR politician who stepped out of the state arena to move up to parliament, was not considered either. Some were placed in constituencies with no existing or strong support base, thus decreasing

their chances of success from the outset. This included Haniza Mohamed Talha, an incumbent for the Taman Medan state seat, who despite having actively served her constituents there since 2008, was transferred to the Pas stronghold of Lembah Jaya in GE14.

The case of Gan Pei Nei, then Rawang incumbent, who was dropped by PKR made news headlines. Also a two-term Selangor Adun, Pei Ni had a sound track record and appeared, under normal circumstances, as a likely candidate for renomination. Prior to the PKR state list being finalised however, a ‘poison pen letter’ was circulated alleging her misuse of state funds. Separately, there were questions as to whether or not her absence from work, which was a two-week break following the delivery of her baby, had contributed to this decision when in fact she was entitled to 90-days of maternity leave. Despite the gravity of the ‘poison pen letter’ allegations, the party did not give her an opportunity to clear her name before the decision was made to drop her. Another PKR woman candidate, Juwairiya Zulkifli, made the news on nomination day as well but for very different reasons. After the original PKR candidate was disqualified on technical grounds at the nomination centre, Juwairiya found herself roped in as a last-minute replacement for the state seat of Bukit Melawati. Ironically, she had been working in Bukit Melawati for at least two years and was initially excluded from contesting after this seat was given to another woman candidate who like Juwairiya, had been working in another constituency but was handed Bukit Melawati instead. Her inclusion proved fortuitous for the party as she won with a greater majority.

A fresh state-level DAP woman candidate in Selangor concurred that if the party leadership “played politics”, it would have been hard for her to be selected to contest in GE14. However, as it stood, she felt that the party’s selection process was carefully done since the choice of candidates had to be justifiable to members and grassroots supporters. She also acknowledged the role of the top brass, saying that because those leading the party had faith in some younger members, they were willing to take the risk and field them. Hence in Selangor, DAP not only fielded three new women candidates — who all won in their state seats — but they were younger as well. The fact that the party placed them all in safe seats was testimony of its seriousness in backing its long-term investments. This same candidate recognised that she had benefitted from previously working under a female DAP Adun, and that her own stint as a local councillor had allowed her to demonstrate that she was a worthy candidate for GE14.

The argument that last minute deliberations and decision-making on the choice of candidates was problematic and disadvantaged women also resonated with one Amanah woman politician in Selangor. Having “kena maki [been cursed]” and told to “balik jaga cucu [go home and look after your grandchildren] after she was selected as a candidate, she believed that parties had to “find a mechanism [to resolve this] to cause minimum disruption”. Although none of the other women interviewed highlighted this kind of disdain and attacks in response to their being picked, media reports show that Jamaliah Jamaluddin also encountered similar attacks by a male DAP member who, in an apparent attempt to taint her selection, had accused her of being a communist


28 Interview with Laila (pseud.), 23 May 2018
Apart from problematic selection procedures, another oft-heard explanation for the dearth of women in party lists, is that women themselves are unwilling to step forward because they are “not ready”. This would appear to be the experience with DAP given it is fairly well-known that even though the party is the oldest in the new ruling coalition, it has had difficulties mobilising women as election candidates. Hence, even though the party has tried to encourage as many women and youth to join as leaders, they were still “short in supply” as the tendency was for women to stop at participating in discussions, rather than to go on and become active members. The insufficient number of female role models was an issue too, as was the broader thinking in society, especially held by older women and those outside urban centres, that politics was the job of men, or more specifically, that political leaders had to be Muslim and male.

The challenge of finding a pool of willing women candidates was the case with Amanah too. As one of the two newest component members in PH, the women’s wing Angkatan Wanita Amanah Nasional (Awan) only had around two years to prepare for GE14. Hence, even though they were able to establish and stabilise a core group of Awan members, they needed more time to widen and strengthen their membership in some states, as well as ensure that their members were adequately prepared and trained to take up positions as candidates in the polls. Few were willing to “sacrifice [their time with family]” or “to go through the drill [to give back to the country]”, while others were held back by economic considerations. All these also explain the party’s low female representation at the polls in Selangor, where none were fielded in the parliamentary contest, and only two were chosen to run at the state level.

The DAP and Amanah examples where women members were “tak sanggup [unwilling]” or “tak mau [don’t want]” to become candidates was not shared by PKR, at least not according to another woman candidate from the party:

_A lot of women offered themselves to be candidates in PRU14 [GE14]. We [Wanita Keadilan] have shaken them up and given them confidence. They also started working on the ground much earlier than the men. In the end, they still got dropped at the last minute._

In her view too, “women are committed and passionate, and not easily dissuaded” and thus would make good candidates. All they needed was support and opportunities. As a relatively more established party, especially next to Amanah and Bersatu, PKR had the benefit of time to run capacity building workshops for its women, and also set up a women’s youth wing, Srikandi Keadilan, to encourage the involvement of younger women in the party. Importantly, it had also benefited from the single-mindedness and commitment of the Wanita Keadilan leadership, in particular that of the outgoing head, Zuraida Kamaruddin, who has been credited not only with

boosting the confidence of the women’s wing members but fighting to defend their interests too. All these raised the morale of women party members and resulted in a number of them being more than ready to step up to be counted as candidates in GE14.

Following the earlier mentioned surrendering of seats initially designated for PKR women candidates, and left with little alternative, Zuraida as Wanita Keadlian head, pleaded with the other parties benefitting from this arrangement to fill these seats with “calon wanita berkaliber (women candidates with calibre)”, rather than male candidates. As seen in the case of Amanah, and to a lesser extent DAP — which fielded only four women and all at the state level — this plea fell on deaf ears. It was worst received in Bersatu, which for reasons unknown, did not put up women candidates for the nine seats it was allocated in Selangor.
Conclusion and Recommendations

Internal party characteristics and competition were by far the most important determinants of the number and nature of women’s candidacy within each party at GE14. Even though newer parties like Amanah and Bersatu may have faced challenges in securing women contestants, overall, there was no shortage of women who were willing to stand as electoral candidates. In larger parties like UMNO and PKR, in particular, there were more potential women candidates than there were available or identified seats for women to contest. That only approximately 11 per cent of them ended up running for parliamentary and state seats points to the critical influence of political parties in charting the nature, direction and selection of women’s representation in politics.

The argument that women are less competent, accomplished or lacking in ‘merit’ was debunked by how their overall performance as GE14 candidates was better than their male counterparts. Unsurprisingly, those from PH-Warisan did better than those in BN since the overall popularity of a party or coalition — where PH was more favoured this time — was the almost singular determinant in the success of candidates, regardless of gender. However, within PH-Warisan there was a fairly large divide between PKR, DAP and Warisan which were more generous in the allocation of seats to their women members compared to Bersatu and Amanah. While the latter two held back the share of women representatives in PH-Warisan, all parties, including those in BN, could have done better by nominating more women candidates, and in winnable seats. This would have ensured the achievement of the minimum 30 per cent target, proven elsewhere in the world as a way to ensure that women’s voices and interests are heard in the highest levels of a country’s decision-making structures.

Although all the women candidates interviewed in this study were highly qualified in terms of their educational background, being in the different political parties did affect how, or if, they would be chosen as candidates, and if they could win. For example, in the case of UMNO, its party stature and popularity had waned thus making the task of success for its candidates difficult, even if they had worked hard and had resources to build a local base and presence. These were insufficient to counter the palpable electoral mood for change that underpinned GE14.

This monograph concludes with two levels of recommendations to help increase the number of women candidates in the next general election; the first, internal to each political party, and the second, to be externally driven by the government of the day.

The first recommendation calls for a major shift from the patriarchal and exclusionary practices currently in place in all political parties, towards the adoption of ‘new’ values such as gender equality and inclusivity. This means that they would need to develop relevant policies or at the very least, ensure that all groups of women are equally represented at all levels of their decision-making structures. Such a move will also augur well for increasing the visibility of these members and hence improve their chances of nomination in the general elections. Ideally, this should be supplemented
with equipping women party members with a broader skills set and expertise. This includes better negotiation skills, and substantive constituency and political knowledge that can enable them to have the confidence and fluency to speak for and beyond localised issues; the ability to project themselves inside and outside the party together with mastering usage of all forms of media including social media, and supporting the building of an autonomous resource and supporter base.

There is also an urgent need to reform party dynamics that are resistant to changing norms, continue to prioritise ‘strongman’ and ‘masculine’ culture, excessive patronage, conservation of values such as blind loyalty, all of which discriminate against women. Specifically, the current candidate selection process lacks clarity, transparency and accountability, and too often is perceived to favour those with stature as well as resources, conditions more often associated with men than women party members. Correcting these will mitigate the chances of women candidates being targets of internal party sabotage, excluded and discarded, particularly at the last minute or when ‘deals’ are struck.

The need to strengthen and support internal change within political parties is clear. However, recognising the reality that women’s issues are still not perceived as important in the Malaysian political arena, the systemic and broader reforms required are best spearheaded by the government. ‘Women’s issues’ were seen to be very narrowly framed during GE14, albeit a reflection of the dominant discourses on gender, which fail to foreground and challenge structures that promote and perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination. Gender has to be mainstreamed for women’s issues to be recognized as integral concerns in Malaysia’s political landscape, and for more women to be elected into national and state legislatures.

Given the intransigence of the current male-dominated political system, the introduction of legislation by way of temporary special measures like gender quotas would also be of paramount importance to accelerate the number of women in key decision-making roles or positions, either at the level of parties or local, state and federal governments. This should go hand-in-hand with reforming the first-past-the-post electoral system, which has been shown for too long to give undue advantage to male candidates. The manner in which election campaigns are currently run needs addressing as well since the short campaign period, 11 days in the case of GE14, is resource and time-intensive and disadvantages those without such reserves, usually women party members.

Combined, these measures could effectively change the entrenched dynamics that have impeded the greater political representation of women in Malaysia, and go a long way to improving the political life of the nation.
References


