

## **Young Women Leaders: A Real Trend or Utopia (2000)**

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Firstly, let me extend my warmest appreciation to the organizers of today's conference, FES, for giving me a chance to participate, I am a little surprised by this invitation because I have very little knowledge about politics. My discipline of study is engineering, not political science. As for my experience, it is very limited, both in scope and years.

Like my mother, who now leads the National Justice Party of Malaysia (Keadila), my involvement in politics happened by accident rather than by design. Although politics is in my father's blood, political discussion was almost absent at our dining table. It is very recently that I have come to understand my father's involvement in politics, as well as how he came to be involved in the first place.

Politics has been almost second nature to my father. His involvement has been extremely varied. He led the student movement of his days which protested against discriminatory development programs with an urban-bias. He consistently expressed his opinion on both domestic and international issues. He also led student demonstrations in support of hungry peasants and against the American bombing of Vietnam.

I have come to understand that one's involvement in politics is often induced by the burning issues of the day. My father took up student and social activism because he had a cause to fight for namely poverty, corruption and the government's lack of commitment to address the issues. He took it on as his moral responsibility to inform the nation of the severity of the matter and to exert pressure on the government to redress the problems.

My sudden involvement in politics in my country is a result of a recent tragedy in my family. In September 1998, my father was removed from the government in a manner that shocked our family, as well as the entire nation. He was also arrested and assaulted. Propaganda and lies meant to embarrass my father and destroy his reputation were disseminated in a manner unprecedented in my country, and perhaps in modern history. As his eldest child, I felt that it was my responsibility to help clear my father's name and to fight for his freedom and his rights.

The burden is great and sometimes I feel that I have neither the strength nor the talent to shoulder this enormous responsibility. Nevertheless, I am always encouraged by my friends, and the leaders whom I have had the opportunity to meet, and who have inspired me to persevere in my cause. The example of President Corazon Aquino, whom I first met in October 1998, convinced me that individuals, regardless of their previous experience, can often become a vehicle for change.

But as days passed, I became aware that my struggle is not confined to a single cause. I will be unrelenting in my determination to free my father. But I feel that I must contribute to the progress of democracy and human rights in my country. To me they are closely related. In reality, my father is nothing but a victim of human rights violations by an authoritarian regime. I strongly feel that there is a new awakening in my country today. The students and youth of today are more aware of the need to fight for democracy and human rights than the previous generation were.

Women have begun to play pivotal roles as agents of change in political process throughout the region. It was President Corazon Aquino that led democracy into its triumphant success in the Philippines. She still symbolizes the people power movement. Before the final phase of the movement to bring down the Suharto dictatorship, Megawati Sukarnoputri and the Indonesian Democratic Party provided the most effective opposition challenging the military rule. We all admire the determination and tenacity of Aung San Kuu Kyi in her struggle against the military junta for the establishment of democracy in Myanmar. In my country, my mother Wan Azizah has to shoulder the daunting task of leading a new party, the National Justice Party, in the struggle against a corrupt and unjust regime. This is the first time in Malaysian history a political party has been led by a woman.

However, women are not only heads of political parties or leaders of organizations. They participate at all levels and are of all ages. Young women everywhere, in organizations as well as in the streets, are challenging the autocrats. In Malaysia, the role of women is so important because they represent more than 50 per cent of voters. Although this figure is not necessarily indicative of women's participation in politics, it is important to note that most of the campaigners for the ruling National Front consists of women, popularly known as Wanita UMNO. But most of these WANITA UMNO now have to face the challenge from WANITA KEADILAN and the rest of the Alternative Front, which consists of the main opposition parties.

I believe that young women do not participate in politics primarily because of gender issues. They participate in politics because they believe in the cause. In Malaysia some of the most active human rights NGOs are lead by women, not because human rights is a gender issue but because they as individuals must participate to advance the cause for human rights. Without human rights, how can we talk of women's rights?

After the establishment of the National Justice Party of Keadilan, hundreds of women from various non-political backgrounds became politically active for the first time. The majority of these women support the opposition. The general elections last November gave me the opportunity to participate directly in election campaigning. Based on my experience, I am convinced that young women are primed to play an even more critical role in Malaysian politics. The women's wing of the National Justice Party is demanding that 30 per cent of the seats on the supreme council be reserved for women.

The opportunity for free and democratic expression in Malaysia today is very limited. This is because the Malaysia's authoritarian regime seeks to suppress any manifestation of dissent. This is indeed the challenge for young women in Malaysia. Democratic rights will not come to them on a silver platter. They will have to fight for them. This is a crucial time for Malaysia as it is at a turning point in its history. It is also a time for young women to emerge as decisive actors in shaping the future of their country.

While this conference is focused on young women leaders, we cannot ignore the fact that most of the barriers to democratic expression and political activity come in the form of repressive laws and programs that create a culture of fear in the entire population. In Malaysia, examples of these laws are the Universities and Colleges Act and the Internal Security Act (ISA). The Universities and Colleges Act was enacted in 1974 to prevent students from participating in political activities not endorsed by the government. The ISA allows for indefinite detention without trial. Corruption and lack of transparency in Malaysia has severely undermined the independence of the judiciary and other key institutions. When it comes to the burning issues affecting our society, the people are being told in no uncertain terms: "If you say anything, you will lose everything. If you say nothing, you might get something."

Despite this, my generation continues to be critical of the government. Recent increases in human rights abuses, and the spread of corruption, cronyism and nepotism has added to their indignation. The government has retaliated by accusing the youth of being ungrateful and unpatriotic. Most recently the youth leader of National Justice Party, Ezam Mohd Nor, has been accused of betraying the country for criticizing the Prime Minister abroad.

The youth of Malaysia today are no less patriotic than the older generation. Our country is in a severe state of crisis. The root cause of this crisis is the lack of democracy, the abuse of power and corruption. We feel that it is our moral duty to correct the misdeeds of the government or anyone occupying public office. It is therefore preposterous to accuse us of being unpatriotic or of betraying our country simply because we are discharging our moral responsibility. If in discharging that moral responsibility we are required to criticize even the prime minister, so be it!

Whether the participation of young women in political struggles is real or illusory very much depends on our attitude towards the crucial and burning issues of the day. We are living in a time where the march of democracy is irresistible, yet the forces of authoritarianism are still strong. I think young women should unite to strengthen the forces of democracy and to fight to end all forms of tyranny and political servitude. If the young women of my generation take up this challenge, then their effect on politics is real, regardless of whether they hold any position in political organizations. For the democratic movement to succeed, it is vital that young women democrats organize effective networks and forge strong bonds of solidarity to achieve their objective: the empowerment of democracy.

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