The Discursive Legitimation of the Political Gender Gap in Twitter Debates

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A New Malaysia?
61 Years of Single Coalition Rule

- Barisan Nasional: 1957-2018
- Ethnicised political system
- Pro-Malay preferential policies
- Discriminatory
- Wealth-accumulation by elites
14th General Election (9 May 2018)

- A decade of public protests against cronyism, corruption, 1MDB scandal, etc.
14th General Election
(9 May 2018)

- A decade of public protests against cronyism, corruption, 1MDB scandal, etc.
- Won by Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope)
- Coalition of opposition parties
A New Malaysia?

• Equal opportunities
• Greater social justice
• “Justice for All”
Justice and Equality for All?
Low Representation of Women in Parliament

- Significant problem
- GE14: 32 women MPs
- 137 / 194 countries (% of women MPs) (IPU 2018)

Source: TheGlobalEconomy.com, The World Bank

- 14.4% MPs
- 10.8% MPs
- 8.3% ministers
Low Representation of Women in Parliament

• Gender gap in candidacy
• Pakatan Harapan election pledge: 30% women in all levels of governance
• But only 85/660 candidates

- 14.4% MPs
- 10.8% MPs
- 8.3% ministers

Source: TheGlobalEconomy.com, The World Bank
The #30peratus Campaign

- 10 May – 2 July

Women’s rights advocates released statement calling for at least 30% women in Cabinet

#30peratus Twitter campaign
The Current Cabinet

- 2 July
- 1st woman DPM
- 5 ministers (19%)
- 4 dep. ministers (17%)
- Little public outcry – why?
The Case Study
Aim

• To develop a better understanding of the ideologies and discourses that keep public pressure for gender reform at a low level
• #30peratus Twitter campaign as a case study
  • Important forum for public debate on gender equality in Malaysian politics
  • Highly contested space - hegemonic views on gender were frequently expressed
• Provides a lens on varying perspectives on women’s participation in high public office
Limitations

• Twitter content as reflection of the ideological positions of Malaysian tweeters on women’s low representation in cabinet

• Cannot be generalised

• Useful gateway for identifying the ideologies and discourses in the public sphere that maintain acceptance of the gender status quo in politics
The Data

- Public tweets containing #30peratus or #30percent (10 May - 2 July)
- Public replies
- Relevant retweeted posts
- Any visible text in memes and hyperlinks

- 2,000 tweets and replies

- Hashtagged posts that do not discuss women’s political representation in Malaysia
Analytical Approaches

FEMINIST CDA

CRITICAL STYLISTICS

VAN LEEUWEN’S FRAMEWORK ON DISCURSIVE LEGITIMATION
What did I find?

- Patriarchal Ideologies
- Neoliberalism
- Postfeminism

System of thought in favour of privatisation, self-interest & self-reliance.

Celebrates selected feminist ideas, e.g. women’s empowerment & autonomy. Insists that gender equality has been achieved, & feminism is redundant (McRobbie, 2004)
‘Women are not up to the job’

Honestly just for the start ignore the gender and go for merit first. They are starting with 10 ministries first. Get the most capable in then do the inclusiveness thing later. Also sidenote at cabinet level, experience and character are as important as qualifications.

• The imperative and sequence adverb trigger a value assumption

• The gender of the MPs should be ignored and the inclusiveness thing should be done later → enhancing gender diversity in cabinet (i.e. selecting more women) = undesirable
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- ignore/go for and first/later → strong impression of opposition between appointing women ministers and selecting those with merit and the most capable
‘Male-as-norm’

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• the most capable could refer to MPs of any sex
• Only 3 women ministers needed to fill quota → Serious reservations about women’s political calibre
• The assertion implies that the women lack experience and character
• Overlooks the fact that many of the men MPs were new to governance
Neoliberal discourse of meritocracy makes rejecting gender-based reform appear moral.

Meritocracy is ‘a key ideological term in the reproduction of neoliberal culture ... It proclaims greater equality of opportunity for more people than ever before’ and encourages us ‘to believe that if we try hard enough we can make it: that race or class or gender are not, on a fundamental level, significant barriers to success’ (Littler, 2018: 2)
Neoliberal discourse of meritocracy makes rejecting gender-based reform appear moral

• Within meritocratic discourse, competitive participation = moral obligation (Littler, 2018)

• In Malaysia, moralistic dimension of neoliberal meritocracy galvanised by decades of public dissatisfaction with race-based affirmative action, etc.

• Meritocracy is often construed as binary opposed to corruption and cronyism
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- These nominals carry a moral charge
- Their juxtaposition against the gender and the inclusiveness thing → gender quotas as morally questionable opportunism → delegitimising them
- Rejecting gender-based reform = a moral act, not a sexist one
- Quotas and affirmative action = regressive
Nation rebuilding as alibi for sexist beliefs

Malaysia is undergoing [recovery]. Put the capable and wise one first regardless the gender.

[what is more important is to save the country. no need to care if they are a man or woman, what is important is that they are truly great and qualified]

• Implicit objection to quota relies on assumption that there are not enough capable, wise, great or qualified women MPs to meet it

• Again, obfuscated by meritocratic discourse, triggered by these adjectives
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[what is more important is to save the country. no need to care if they are a man or woman, what is important is that they are truly great and qualified]

• Moral evaluation occurs with **instrumental rationalisation** for supporting meritocracy
• (De)legitimates practices by reference to goals, uses and effects (van Leeuwen, 2007)
• **Constructing national interests** provide compelling reasons for meritocracy → delegitimises gender quotas further
You guys are not helping the situation by putting pressure on the new govt. They have major issues to deal with. Give them time to sort things out. Relax and calm down. Your voices will be heard, but now is definitely not the time.

• Verb phrase ➔ conventional implicature that pressuring the govt for 30% women ministers = undesirable

• Obscures the problem that women are not valued as leaders
‘Women’s political leadership as inessential’

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- Textual cue to views on abuse of political power AND demand for gender-equal political participation
- Jeffries’s (2010) notion of auto-evocation
- Invokes major/trivial opposition
- Having more women leaders = inconsequential (women as followers, not leaders)
- Brushed aside
‘Gender equality has been achieved’

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- Modal verb – strong commitment to myth that women’s concerns will be adequately considered (in this ‘new Malaysia’?)
‘Gender equality has been achieved’

EARN your rights. Without [you] asking, cabinet placement will take place.

• Feminism is unnecessary
• Modal verb – strong belief in gender-equal Malaysia
• Assumes level playing field in politics (in this ‘new Malaysia’?)
‘Women can have it all if they work hard enough’

**EARN your rights.** Without [you] asking, cabinet placement will take place.

Equality is not a number. **We must** [put ourselves forward] and show [our capabilities]. Is not for men to push us upfront my sister.

- Places responsibility for change on the individual
- Reject collective solutions and government intervention
- **Old vs New Malaysia?**
- **Directives** interpellate women as enterprising subjects of capacity
- **Obligational modality** – neoliberal imperative to strive for achievement as compulsory
Summary of Findings

Patriarchal attitudes persist

Neoliberal & postfeminist discourses → gender status quo appear moral & commonsensical

(Implicit) disavowal of sexism = key mechanism through which gender inequalities are preserved

What are the implications of these, moving forward?
Challenges for Political Organising for Women’s Empowerment

• Collective pressure is crucial for gender-based reforms in Malaysia

• Challenges due to:
  • Resistance from what is believed to be a moral position of national interest,
  • Denial of structural power relations, and
  • Privatisation of issues of inequality
Counter-discourses

- 'Patriarchal party structures'
- 'Broken promises'
- 'Women's representation as crucial for empowerment'
- 'Women can lead'
- 'Women should be recognised for their role in bringing change'
- 'Women can contribute to nation rebuilding'
- 'Quota necessary to reverse gender bias'

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- Women can lead
- Women can contribute to nation rebuilding
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- Women's representation as crucial for empowerment
Research on the Attraction of Neoliberalism and Postfeminism

• To grasp their power and disrupt them when mobilizing change, we need to attend to the affective dimensions of these ideologies and address questions of investment and desire (Gill, 2008)

• **Contextualised linguistic research** on how these ideologies achieve their effective governance
Research in Non-traditional Political Arenas

- Crucial to explore how gendered power relations in politics is maintained through discursive means in informal political arenas, e.g. social media.
- Frequent reinforcement of discourses in the online discussions not only reflects, but mystifies patriarchal power arrangements in political life.
References


Thank You!