

‘Where’s our #30peratus’: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Twitter Debates on Women’s Political Representation

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Introduction

For women in Malaysia, equal representation in elected office, particularly in positions of political power, continues to be a challenge. Even though female candidates performed better than their male peers in GE14, women hold only 32 of the 222 parliamentary seats (14.4 per cent¹) due to a gender gap in candidacy (Yeong, 2018). Women accounted for 10.8 per cent of candidates nominated to stand for election, despite constituting 25–50 per cent of members in major political parties (Tan, 2011). The winning alliance, Pakatan Harapan (PH), fielded 85 women out of a total of 660 candidates (Bernama, 2018), thus falling short of their electoral pledge to ensure that ‘at least 30% of policymakers are women’² (Pakatan Harapan, 2018: 140). While the new PH government appointed more women to the Cabinet than previous administrations³, including the country’s first woman deputy prime minister, the long-standing gender gap in Malaysia’s highest decision-making body remains substantial: only 5 of the 26 ministers and 4 of the 23 deputy ministers are women. This female underrepresentation has not, however, generated much public criticism and it is this widespread acceptance of the status quo that is the focus of the present study.

This chapter engages in a close textual analysis of the #30peratus⁴ Twitter campaign led by feminist activists to demand 30 per cent women in the Malaysian Cabinet. By examining the social debate surrounding women’s minority representation in the ministerial body, this study aims to develop a critical understanding of the ideologies and discourses in the public sphere that maintain apathy towards this ‘glass ceiling’ and obfuscate the gender discrimination that persists in the ostensibly new political climate. As ‘discourse’ is a polysemous concept, it is necessary to clarify that it is understood here as socio-historically

¹ While this figure is the highest in Malaysian history, at the time of writing, i.e. October 2018, Malaysia ranks 137th among 194 countries for the proportion of women MPs (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018).

² Malaysia is a signatory of the Beijing Platform for Action, which called on governments to set specific targets to ensure women’s equal participation in power structures and decision-making.

³ Prior to GE14, the number of women ministers had never exceeded 3 in any administration.

⁴ Malay for 30 per cent.

contingent signification practices that ‘systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972: 49). Discourses reproduce the prejudice, gender stereotypes and ideologies that are used to marginalise women and legitimise male privilege, such as the ideology of separate spheres that continues to constrain women’s access to political office around the world⁵. Therefore, research on dominant discourses in public debates can reveal much about the ideologies that sustain the prevailing gendered patterns of exclusion operating within Malaysian political institutions. Since less than 10 per cent of the Malaysian population are active on Twitter (Khong, 2016), there is a limitation to how far it is possible to generalise the findings of this study. Nevertheless, the online debates serve as a useful gateway that opens up identification of ideologies and discourses that keep public pressure for gender reform at a low level.

To situate the online campaign and analysis, I begin with a discussion on women’s descriptive and substantive representation, before outlining the development of the #30peratus initiative. I move on to briefly explain my methodology and analytical approach. Then, drawing on feminist critical discourse analysis, I deconstruct the ideological discourses in the Twitter content that legitimise and rationalise women’s lack of access to political power structures. I then discuss the hegemonic status of the ideologies and discourses identified. Finally, this chapter closes with a few recommendations for further research.

Women’s Representation in Politics and Decision-Making

Scholars and theorists have long debated whether the increased descriptive representation of women in legislative bodies would improve women’s substantive representation. Proponents of a politics of presence have called for the enhancement of women’s political participation based on arguments of social justice and on claims that this will substantively improve policy-making processes and outcomes (Grey, 2006). In the context of Malaysia, Tan and Ong (2009: 105) argue that bringing more women’s voices to legislative assemblies can introduce much-needed diversity to these debating chambers and support the consideration of differing perspectives, realities and concerns among women across the population. This will dilute the essentialism of women in laws, making these legislations ‘better equipped to deal with and address the needs of women who face multiple discriminations, for example, on the grounds of gender, class, ethnicity, and level of education’.

⁵ In many countries, who is deemed suitable to be involved in politics is underpinned by an ideology that sees politics as a male sphere and women as interlopers. See Celis et al. (2013) for a fuller discussion.

Critics of descriptive representation, however, stress that measurable improvements in women's lives and status are facilitated not by higher numbers of women office-holders, but through 'critical acts' that enhance the position of women considerably, such as the introduction of gender quotas (Dahlerup, 2006). While within this view critical actors can be elected officials of any sex who advocate in the interest of the women they represent (Childs and Krook, 2006), studies have repeatedly shown that women in political office tend to place a higher priority on women's needs than their male colleagues (e.g., Bratton, 2005). Having reviewed empirical literature on issues of substantive representation, Celis et al. (2008) report that although an increase in the number of women legislators does not automatically translate into more women-friendly policy outcomes, women parliamentarians often feel an obligation to represent women and share the opinions of women voters and activists.

Weldon (2002) suggests looking beyond individual legislators since potential critical actors can include women's movements operating as a collective in nonconventional political arenas. This seems to ring true for Malaysia, where substantive changes have depended crucially on women's organisations successfully forcing their agenda on the state (Tan, 2011). Nonetheless, advances in redressing women's issues have been uneven and slow as these NGOs have had to work through 'various sympathetic (or otherwise) officials in the government just to get an issue or event recognised as problematic, let alone rectified'. In the process of negotiating their demands, they are obliged to make many concessions and compromises⁶ (Martinez, 2003: 87). As such, civil society groups have demanded the imposition of gender quotas to accelerate the entry of women into legislative and ministerial bodies based on the belief that this will help push women's issues to the forefront of the political agenda.

The #30peratus Campaign

On 10 May 2018, a day after GE14, a group of seven women's rights advocates released a statement⁷ calling for a minimum 30 per cent women in Cabinet (Kuga Thas et al., 2018). This was quickly followed by the #30peratus Twitter campaign, which attempted to mobilise

⁶ The Domestic Violence Act is a prime example. After almost a decade of agitation by the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality, the government established the Act in 1994. However, the activists had to not only accept a compromised version of the Act, but also lobby for a further 2 years before the legislation was implemented in 1996 (Tan, 2011).

⁷ The statement was dated 11 May, but was posted on Twitter on 10 May.

Malaysians to demand the PH government ‘to uphold their promises to put at least 30% women in all levels of governance’ (EMPOWER, 2018). This 30 per cent figure is often regarded as the crucial turning point for minority groups to have a substantive impact on legislative outcomes. At present, more than 130 countries have adopted some form of gender quota to enhance women's political representation, with the most widespread quota percentage being 30 per cent (International IDEA, Inter-Parliamentary Union and Stockholm University, 2018; Dahlerup, 2006). While scholars have rightly urged for a more guarded approach towards the notion of a ‘critical mass’⁸, such as 30 per cent women, this concept has been important for the international trend of introducing electoral gender quotas, which, in turn, has facilitated increased levels of women in national parliaments (Childs and Krook, 2006; Dahlerup, 2006). In this regard, the 30 per cent target serves as a valuable milestone towards gender parity in decision-making.

Over the subsequent months, Twitter served as an important forum for public debate on gender equality in Malaysian political life, with #30peratus and #30percent emerging as the most frequently used hashtags marking the topic. Although the incorporation of social media in issue-based movements has the *potential* to fuel civic involvement and influence state policies and public opinion, the *actual* impact of digital activism is not always as hoped. In the case of the #30peratus campaign, not only did the government eventually fail to fulfil its pledge, but the virtual forum also became a highly contested space wherein hegemonic views on gender were frequently expressed. As such, this online campaign provides us with a lens on varying perspectives on women’s participation in high public office and the complexity of the struggle for equal gender representation.

Data and Analytical Approach

For the purpose of this study, I constructed a corpus of tweets containing the hashtags #30peratus or #30percent posted from 10 May until 2 July 2018 when the full Cabinet was sworn in. Replies to these posts were also included, while hashtagged messages that did not discuss women’s political representation in Malaysia were discarded. Not all tweets on the issue were marked with a hashtag, which means that some relevant data could not be collected. Nevertheless, users of #30peratus and #30percent often republished these messages

⁸ According to the critical mass theory, ‘only when the proportion of women in a political institution reaches a certain percentage would women be able to ‘act for’ women as a group’ (Tan, 2011: 81). See Celis et al. (2008), Childs and Krook (2006) and Dahlerup (2006) for a full critique of the theory.

to display their stance towards another position. By including these retweets, the dataset is made more representative.

The corpus contained approximately 2,000 tweets and replies posted in English and Malay by women's rights groups, activists, media professionals, academics, politicians and other members of the public. These texts were interrogated through feminist critical discourse analysis, a research paradigm 'concerned with demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power and ideology in discourse' (Lazar, 2005: 5). Guided by feminist principles and insights, I perform a close linguistic analysis of the data to unravel the ideologies on Twitter that legitimise hegemonic gender relations in Malaysian politics and the dominant discourses that propagate and naturalise these ideologies.

The Neoliberal and Postfeminist Legitimation of Political Gender Inequality

The analysis indicates that not only are patriarchal attitudes towards women in politics prevalent among Malaysian Twitter users, but, crucially, discourses endorsing patriarchal ideologies⁹ are often legitimised in terms of neoliberal and postfeminist discourses. Neoliberalism is a system of thought in favour of privatisation, self-interest and self-reliance. Within this ideology, individuals are conceptualised as entrepreneurial actors who are personally accountable for their progress, no matter the disadvantages faced due to their circumstances (Brown, 2003). This neoliberal emphasis on self-responsibilisation chimes with postfeminism, which celebrates selected ideas associated with feminism like women's empowerment, choice and autonomy, but insists that gender equality has been achieved and, therefore, feminism is redundant (McRobbie, 2004). Like neoliberalism, it replaces any notion of individuals as subject to pressures or constraints outside themselves (Gill, 2008) with a feel-good narrative of self-determination and self-efficacy. In the following, I closely examine the knots of patriarchal, neoliberal and postfeminist discourses that preserve the hegemonic paradigm justifying women's exclusion from positions of political power.

The Entanglement of Misogynistic and Meritocratic Discourses

As many tweets against the 30 per cent women quota share the implicit assumption that women MPs are less qualified for ministerial posts than their male peers, I begin by

⁹ Systems of beliefs that legitimate power relations which 'privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women as a social group' (Lazar, 2005: 5).

interrogating the proliferation of the patriarchal ‘women are not up to the job’ discourse, as in this response to the 10 May statement:

(1) 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 *ignore* and sequence adverb *later* trigger a value assumption, that is, an assumption about ‘what is good or desirable’ (Fairclough, 2003: 55). If *the gender* (of the MPs) should be *ignored* and *the inclusiveness thing* should be done *later*, then enhancing gender diversity in Cabinet, and effectively selecting more women, are assumed to be undesirable. Whilst the basis for this negative evaluation is not made explicit, it appears tied to ‘women are not up to the job’ since the contrast between *ignore/go for* and *first/later* creates a strong impression of opposition between appointing women ministers and selecting those with *merit* and *the most capable*. As there is no unambiguous reference to men in *the most capable*, this noun phrase could refer to competent parliamentarians of any sex¹⁰. Yet, when we consider that only three women ministers¹¹ were needed to fill the quota at that time, the Twitter user’s disapproval of affirmative action suggests serious, though perhaps unconscious, reservations about women’s political calibre. This is possibly because women do not fit the typical image of the ideal (male) leader. The ‘male-as-norm’ discourse is perceptible in the assertion *experience and character are as important as qualifications*. Read as a direct response to the activists’ statement which highlighted the academic credentials of twenty female MPs, it strongly implies that women parliamentarians lack *experience and character*¹², while overlooking the fact that many of their male colleagues were themselves new to governance.

The ‘women are not up to the job’ discourse is not new. Researchers have long held that deep-seated beliefs against the ability of women to lead has curtailed their advancement within the political realm (e.g., Rashila, 1998). Of note here is its intimate entanglement with

¹⁰ The tweeter argues later in the thread that ‘It’s meant to read as whoever regardless of gender who is capable’.

¹¹ The Prime Minister had announced that the PH government would first form a partial ten-ministry cabinet.

¹² These MPs’ political experience and the issues they champion were also described in the statement to demonstrate that there are a sufficient number of competent women in parliament.

the neoliberal¹³ discourse of meritocracy in the Twitter debates. Again and again, the patriarchal misogyny underlying ‘women are not up to the job’ is masked by the prevailing meritocratic discourse, textually cued in (1) above by *merit* and *the most capable*. Within the Malaysian context where neoliberal meritocracy is often construed as binary opposed to corruption and race-based cronyism¹⁴, these nominals carry a moral charge. Their juxtaposition against *the gender* and *the inclusiveness thing* constructs gender quotas as morally questionable opportunism, thereby delegitimising¹⁵ them. As such, rejecting gender-based reform becomes a moral act instead of a sexist one.

Nation Rebuilding as Rationalisation

In numerous instances, the fusion of the trope of nation rebuilding with the discourse of meritocracy provides an alibi for discriminatory beliefs:

(2) Malaysia is undergoing pemulihan [recovery] process. Put the capable and wise one first regardless the gender.

(3) apa yg lebih penting adalah selamatkan negara,tak pyh kisah lah lelaki ka perempuan,yg penting,benar2 hebat dan layak [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]

In the extracts above, the objection to the demand for 30 per cent women in Cabinet relies on the assumption that there are not enough *capable*, *wise* or *qualified* parliamentary women to meet the quota. As with (1), this sexist view is obfuscated by meritocratic discourse that

¹³ Littler (2018: 2) makes the link between meritocracy and neoliberalism explicit, arguing that 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’.

¹⁴ Over the years, there have been strong calls for a meritocratic system to replace pro-bumiputra policies, which are seen as institutionalising racism and favouring rent-seeking behaviour and crony capitalism (Chin, 2009).

¹⁵ Within van Leeuwen’s (2007) framework on discursive legitimation, moral evaluation legitimates or delegitimises practices by reference to value systems, in this case the value system of meritocracy.

delegitimizes preferential policies. This moral evaluation occurs in combination with instrumental rationalisation¹⁶ for supporting meritocracy. Constructed national interests, referenced by emotionally-laden metaphors (*undergoing [recovery]*, *save the country*), provide compelling reasons for meritocracy, thus delegitimising gender quotas further.

Another patriarchal discourse that contributes strongly to the social acceptance of women's under-representation in Cabinet is 'women's political empowerment is inessential'. In (1), the noun phrase *the inclusiveness thing* betrays a dismissive attitude towards bringing women to the decision-making table. This discourse is given new potency by zero-sum thinking between effecting gender parity and addressing political scandals, as illustrated in this example:

(4) 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.

The verb phrase *are not helping* creates the conventional implicature that pressuring the government for 30 per cent women ministers is undesirable, in this case because it ostensibly hinders PH from resolving the country's legacy issues of corruption and debt. In the Twitter debates, such argumentation centred on nation rebuilding often obscures the underlying problem that women are not valued as leaders and policy-makers. In this post, the tweeter had various options for how to refer to the alleged crimes. His choice of *major issues* is a textual cue to his views not only on the suspected abuse of power by Barisan Nasional, but also on the demand for gender-equal political participation. The adjective *major* invokes the *major/trivial* opposition¹⁷, which suggests that the latter issue is inconsequential in contrast to the former. The problem of women's meaningful representation is finally brushed aside with *now is definitely not the time*, reinforcing 'women's political empowerment is inessential'.

The Postfeminist Myth of Gender Equality

Many Twitter users appear to have been lulled into the postfeminist illusion that we are now

¹⁶ Instrumental rationalisation 'legitimizes practices by reference to their goals, uses and effects' (van Leeuwen, 2007: 101).

¹⁷ According to Jeffries's (2010) notion of auto-evocation, using a term can invoke its conventional opposite.

beyond inequalities of gender. In (4) above, assumptions specific to the ‘gender equality has been achieved’ discourse underlie the assertion *Your voices will be heard*. The modal verb *will* indicates a strong commitment to the myth that women’s concerns are adequately taken into account. Another closely related observation is that in the postfeminist guise of structural equality, women are often endowed with capacity. Several posts made references to former and current female ministers to underscore the self-efficacy of women in the political domain:

(5) Rafidah Aziz can do it without quota.

In presenting the former Minister of International Trade and Industry as ‘proof’ that gender quotas are unnecessary for female success, the assertion in (5) reinforces ‘gender equality has been achieved’. Embedded within this tweet is the discourse that women can ‘have it all’ if they work harder on the self. The following extracts are salient examples of how the latter discourse operates:

(6) EARN your rights. Without your asking, cabinet placement will take place.

(7) Equality is not a number. We must *tampilkan diri* [put ourselves forward] and show *kebolehan* [our capabilities]. Is not for men to push us up front my sister

Superficially, these messages appear to embolden women. A closer examination of the texts, however, reveals traces of non-emancipatory postfeminist and neoliberal notions. By interpellating women as enterprising subjects of capacity through the directives *EARN your rights* and *We must [put ourselves forward] and show [our capabilities]*, the Twitter users erroneously assume a level playing field and incite women to greater self-responsibilisation. Both extracts reject collective solutions and government intervention. As with (4), the modal verb *will* in (6) conveys a strong belief that we live in a gender-equal Malaysia and, therefore, further activism is unnecessary (*Without your asking*). In (7), the obligational modality *must* not only presents the neoliberal imperative to strive for achievement as compulsory, but also places the responsibility for change squarely on the individual. This emphasis on self-transformation rather than social transformation is reinforced in the negative proposition at the end of (7). By stating what should *not* happen, the tweeter conceptualises a hypothetical

situation where women are able to advance through their own efforts without any changes on the part of the men who currently hold power.

Ideological Hegemony and Gendered Power Relations in Malaysian Politics

The present research leverages on the large volume of social interactions during the #30peratus Twitter campaign to gain a deeper understanding of the ideological positions of Malaysians on the issue of women's low representation in Cabinet. The findings indicate that women's political leadership is undervalued in Malaysia Baru, at least among Twitter users. This has clear continuities with earlier research that argues that widespread stereotyping of women as supporters rather than leaders hinders women's descriptive and substantive representation in the country (e.g. Ministry of Women and Family Development, 2003), which also underscores the hegemonic status of patriarchal ideologies in Malaysia. Importantly, this study illustrates how hegemonic gendered power relations in Malaysian politics are maintained¹⁸ through discursive means in nonconventional political arenas such as social media. Given the constitutive capacity of discourses, the frequent reinforcement of 'women are not up to the job' and 'women's political empowerment is inessential' in the online discussions not only reflects, but contributes to the devaluation of women's leadership capabilities¹⁹, thus mystifying patriarchal power arrangements that have segregated Malaysian women from positions of political authority.

The patriarchal ideology that undergirds the general acceptance of women's exclusion from the ministerial body is upheld by a fusion of postfeminism and neoliberalism. Feminists are increasingly identifying these ideologies as critical dimensions of gender equality struggles as they close down the space for confronting issues of injustice that persist. Neoliberalism, in particular, has 'pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many ... interpret, live in, and understand the world' (Harvey, 2005: 3). The data analysis strongly suggests that neoliberal meritocratic discourse at least has become hegemonic in particular segments of Malaysian society. Since hegemony depends on social consent, the moral standing of the dominant social group is crucial. In the case of this study, male hegemonic power in politics is

¹⁸ They are also contested in the Twitter debates. However, examining resistant discourses is beyond the scope of this study.

¹⁹ By not meeting the gender quota, the PH government indirectly authorised these beliefs at an institutional level.

maintained by a moralised neoliberal understanding of meritocracy²⁰. The moralistic dimension of neoliberal meritocracy, in turn, is arguably galvanised by decades of public dissatisfaction with race-based affirmative action policies in Malaysia as well as on-going political scandals involving a party that is seen as the antithesis of a meritocratic order. In other words, following Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony, we could argue that the Twitter users are not dupes of ideology. Rather, they knowingly compromise and consent to the perpetuation of a patriarchal social order, but have legitimated their opinions and resisted improvements to women's situation in politics from what they believe to be a moral position of national interest.

Relatedly, the counter-arguments against the gender quota are also often premised on the postfeminist illusion of egalitarianism. Many opposing the gender quota emphasise women's self-efficacy and agency, framing women's political advancement as a purely personal endeavour while ignoring the social, structural and material constraints to women's agency. This attribution of female capacity could partly stem from a 'collective delusion ... that freedom of the market and an unfettered mass-consumer culture are good enough measures to exact personal autonomy and power' (Ng et al., 2006: 39). Further, the analysis shows that for some, the (gradual) rise of women in high-profile public roles is sufficient evidence that gender-based reforms in Malaysian politics are not needed. Hence, we can argue that providing a small percentage of women with the opportunity to ascend to positions of political power functions as a hegemonic strategy to diffuse feminist politics. Given that gender-based reforms have been a protracted process²¹, collective pressure is critically important for bringing about gender parity. However, as we have seen in this study, the privatisation of issues of inequality and the repudiation of structural power relations pose challenges for women's political organising in Malaysia.

Conclusion

This study provides an empirical account of ideologies and discourses emerging from a specific part of the Twittersphere that endorse gendered patterns of exclusion operating within the Malaysian political sphere. The persistence of patriarchal attitudes reflects earlier studies on the elements impeding women's path to political power in Malaysia. However, a

²⁰ Littler (2008) argues that within meritocratic discourse, competitive participation has come to be presented as a moral obligation.

²¹ See Tan (2011).

closer look at how women's lack of access to power structures is reasoned in the tweets reveals a more complex picture in which postfeminist and neoliberal discourses make the status quo appear moral and commonsensical rather than unjust. In fact, the (implicit) disavowal of sexism is a key mechanism through which gender inequalities in political life are excused and preserved. To better understand the significance of the interpenetration of patriarchal, neoliberal and postfeminist discourses observed in this study, we need to examine discourses in other formal and informal political contexts beyond Twitter use. While scholars have rightly critiqued patriarchal party structures and norms in Malaysia, it is equally important to explore the role that ideologies and discourses play in constituting and sustaining the structures and norms that disadvantage women in political life. There is also a need for more research that confronts the attraction of neoliberalism and postfeminism and how they achieve their effective governance in certain segments of Malaysian society. To grasp their power, the research community needs to attend to the affective dimensions of these ideologies and address questions of investment and desire (Gill, 2008).

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