

Worrying Flattening Curve: Women's Political Participation in Southeast Asia

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While the goal of public health officials has been to flatten the curve of Covid-19, another, less positive, flattening has been taking place over the past few years – the political empowerment of women in Southeast Asia. After decades of gains in the numbers of women in national executives and legislatures and among ordinary women participating in politics, a plateau pattern has emerged. In fact, in some countries – accompanying rising authoritarianism and populism tinged with anti-women rhetoric – we see outright backsliding in female political representation and participation.

This chapter examines trends in female political participation/inclusion in the ten ASEAN countries and Timor-Leste over the last five years, 2015-2020. It builds on and incorporates the discussion of a similar chapter in an earlier publication, updating numbers and pointing to important developments in recent years.¹ The problems for female political participation noted earlier – exclusionary cultural norms, resistant patriarchal political parties and “dirty” politics – have been compounded by narrowing political spaces and less welcoming environments for female participation. Once again, however, there continues to be conflicting trends. While levels of representation and attitudes towards women participating in politics plateau and even in some places decline, data shows the importance of ordinary women in politics and a modest narrowing of gender gaps in the political participation of ordinary citizens.

¹ Bridget Welsh, “Promoting Inclusion: Women’s Political Participation in Southeast Asia,” in *Women, Policy and Political Leadership*, (Singapore: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2014), pp. 9-25.

Lower Numbers but Expanded Portfolios: Curtailed Female Executive Control

Five years ago, Southeast Asia was showing important gains in female leadership. The Philippines had been led by multiple female presidents, including Cory Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the world's largest Muslim democracy, Indonesia, had Megawati Sukarnoputri, and Thailand had the region's first female prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra. Half a decade later, there are only two major female leaders in top positions in the region. The first is Halimah Yacob, Singapore's president elected in a skewed contest in 2017 and holding largely ceremonial powers. The second is Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi, the only female leading a government. She holds the State Counsellor position, as opposed to the presidency as Myanmar's constitution prevents her from assuming this position as she has foreign national children. Despite remaining highly popular within Myanmar, her icon status has been badly dented by events in the Rakhine state from 2017 onwards, involving the forced displacement of the Rohingya community.

Along with these limited gains at the top, a more positive picture emerges at the deputy level. More women have assumed deputy executive positions – the Philippines' Leni Robredo was elected to the vice-presidency in 2016, Malaysia's Wan Azizah Wan Ismail became deputy prime minister in May 2018 and Vietnam's Dang Thi Ngoc Thinh became acting president for a month in September 2018 after the death of the then president, returning to her vice-president position afterwards. They join Cambodia's Men Sam An, who has been deputy prime minister since 2009.

Despite playing prominent roles, women have increasingly become more targeted in their leadership roles in recent years. Both Yingluck and Aung San Suu Kyi are facing charges for wrong-doing of their governments. Robredo was fired in 2019 for criticising President Rodrigo Duterte on the drug war and Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (and the rest of her government with a record number of female ministers and appointees) was ousted from her position in February 2020 in a power grab – showing first-hand the difficult environment that women face holding power.

To understand these developments, one should step back and look at both historical trends as well as recent trajectories. Southeast Asia has never been a region where women national leaders have been prominent. Of the 62 different presidents and 92 prime ministers who have held office

in Southeast Asian countries since 1945, only 6.5% and 1% have been women respectively. The examples of women leaders at the national level that do exist are a relatively recent phenomenon, with Cory Aquino leading the way from 1986. Attaining the position of prime minister via a political party election is particularly difficult. There is only one example where this has happened – Thailand, with Yingluck Shinawatra. Aung San Suu Kyi also leads her party, the National League for Democracy, but is not her country's official leader.

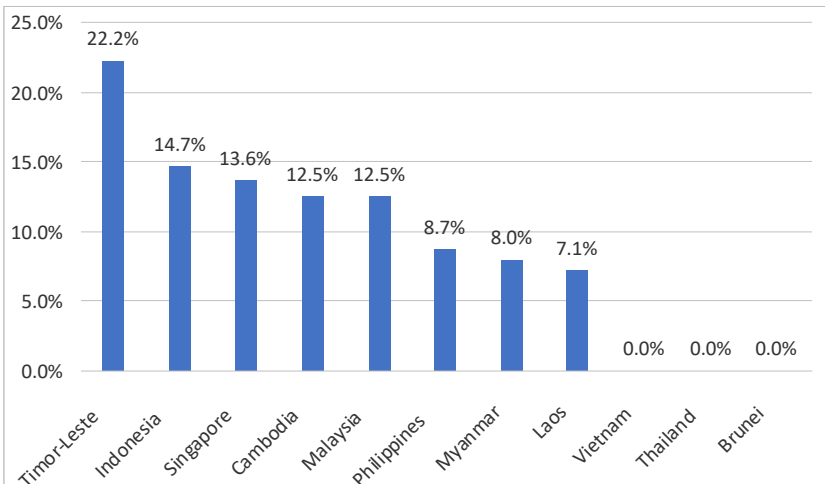
All of Southeast Asia's contemporary female national governing leaders have followed Asia's common "wives and daughters" syndrome of being related to someone who had held the position earlier or been a prominent politician. Megawati, Macapagal-Arroyo and Aung San Suu Kyi were daughters of famous leaders, Aquino and Wan Azizah Wan Ismail are wives of prominent opposition leaders, and Yingluck was a sister to a former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. Family ties and political socialisation continue to play a large role in boosting the chances for women to be elected, a pattern that is as prominent at the local level as it is in the national arena. This is especially the case in the Philippines. There the two-term limit for legislatures encourages the appointment of wives to hold the seat for the male incumbents to return to two terms later. Increasingly this "wives and daughters" pattern is evident in Indonesia, Malaysia and Myanmar as well, as elite families continue to be elected to office.

In other parts of the executive, namely the cabinet, women have held office for decades. My earlier chapter showed that Indonesia led the way in appointing a woman into cabinet, in 1946, as Maria Ulfah Santoso was appointed Minister of Social Affairs. Singapore was the laggard in the region, not appointing its first woman in cabinet, Lim Hwee Hua, until 2009. As we will see below, Singapore is among the contemporary leaders in promoting female inclusion in the executive.

The level of women's representation in cabinet has always varied across the region, but in recent years we have seen two trends in the level of representation – a plateauing and a decline. Chart 1 below shows the share of representation as of August 2020. Compared to five years ago, only Timor-Leste has over 20% females in cabinet. Indonesia, Cambodia, Singapore and Malaysia have under 15% representation, with the Philippines, Myanmar and Laos under 10% female ministers. Three countries – Vietnam, Brunei and Thailand – have no women in cabinet at all. The

Philippines and Thailand – which have both experienced sharp democratic contractions – have had the highest decline in the share of women in cabinet. In 2015 the Philippines was reaching international targets for female representation in cabinet. Today it has joined the lowest ranks. The only countries that show modest increases are Singapore and Cambodia, with an additional minister. Singapore’s increase began in 2009 and has intensified in recent years, as women now lead multiple portfolios. To keep these shares in mind, throughout Southeast Asia only 22 women are full cabinet ministers (with one of those, Aung San Suu Kyi, holding two full ministerial positions).

Chart 1. Women’s Representation in Southeast Asian Cabinets, August 2020.²



If there is an overall positive trend involving women in executive roles it is that increasingly, women are breaking the “women’s work” mould. Throughout Southeast Asia women are taking on varied ministerial portfolios – from finance and foreign affairs to industry and the environment. In Indonesia, women have held 17 different portfolios, with five of these coming recently under President Joko Widodo’s administrations (2014-present). A similar broadening occurred in Malaysia, with women holding portfolios

² These figures were derived from official government websites. Accessed 20 May 2020.

traditionally given to men, such as science, technology and the environment, local housing and development and rural development, under the Mahathir government from 2018-2020

One feature that holds women back from executive positions is the dominance of appointees from the military. We find that regimes closely aligned with the military often see a decrease in female representation. Thailand is a good example. The decline in the Philippines and the low share of women in Myanmar can also be understood through this lens. Many officials from the security forces are given cabinet-level positions but are not listed as ministers. This has especially been the case during Covid-19, where countries in the region have relied on militaries in their responses to the virus. At issue is not only the influence of the military in domestic politics, but the fact that women have fewer arenas for training and recruitment for political advancement.

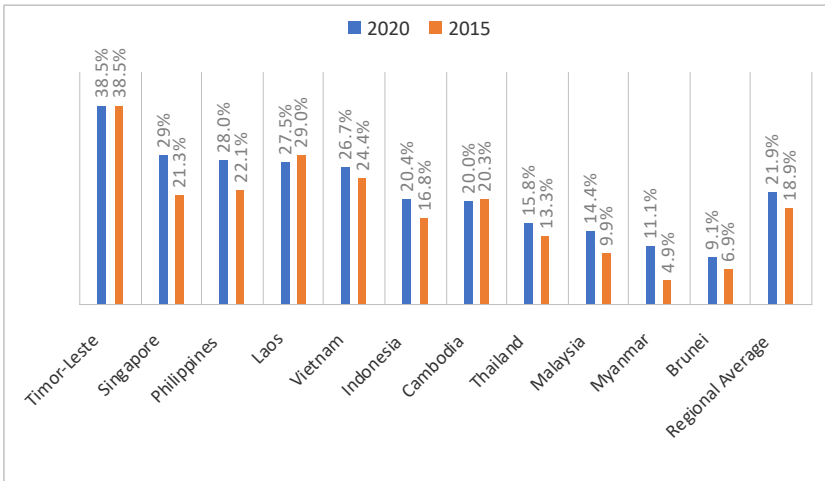
Voices and Collaboration: Legislators and Caucuses

One of the reasons that women have maintained a foothold in cabinet is that female representation in legislatures has remained steadily strong. In 2020, women comprise an average 21.9% of legislatures (lower houses) in Southeast Asia, slightly above the global average of 20%. There is considerable variation across the region, with Timor-Leste (with its strong quota system in place) at 38.5%, and Brunei (with appointees made by the sultan) at 9.1%. Considering changes over time, we see two trends in the level of representation in legislatures – a similar plateauing in representation levels and, in contrast to developments with the executive, a modest increase in representation.

Chart 2 below captures levels of representation of women in legislatures in 2020 and 2015. The dominant pattern is one of consistency – in Timor-Leste, Vietnam, Cambodia, Brunei, and Laos (although here there is a modest decline). After five years, there has been little change in these countries despite turnover – as representation levels have indeed flattened. Elections did bring in more women in the remaining countries of Southeast Asia – Singapore (2020), Myanmar (2015), the Philippines (2016 and 2019), Malaysia (2018) and Thailand (2019). In all these cases the increase was the product of political parties slating more female candidates, and in all cases (except Singapore and the Philippines) the increase

was modest – below the global and regional average. Singapore’s boost in female representation in 2020 came in part due to the opposition Workers Party winning more seats. Importantly, greater democratisation in Myanmar and Malaysia through key elections was not accompanied by major shifts in female political representation, despite the prominent role of female leaders. Ironically and in contrast, contractions of democratisation in Thailand and the Philippines have seen increases in the numbers of women in legislatures. The Philippines had an increase of 7% women parliamentarians, the opposite to the contraction in the executive. Again, the actual numbers of women involved puts this in perspective – less than 100 women in Southeast Asia have become part of national legislatures in the last five years.

Chart 2. Women’s Representation in Southeast Asian Legislatures: 2020 (August) vs. 2015.



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union. <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=5&year=2020>.

The factors accounting for low levels of representation of women in parliament in Southeast Asia outlined in my earlier chapter remain salient. The main responsibility lies with the institutional arrangements that shape the access of women to political positions. Political parties are gate-keepers – they select candidates centrally, marginalise women to their party wings and limit the resources and political upward mobility

for women. The strength of women's party organisations in places such as Vietnam and Laos have contributed to more women in their legislatures, as have decisions by party leaders to slate women, which has occurred in Singapore and Cambodia. Resistance by parties to field women in Thailand and Malaysia, in contrast, account for their lower levels of representation. Even in countries where gains have been made in the legislatures for women, party leaders do not appoint many women into the cabinet or to senior leadership positions. This contradiction is most striking in Vietnam, reaching 27% female representation in the legislature and none in the cabinet. It is also noteworthy that despite being party leader, Aung San Suu Kyi has only one woman in her cabinet – herself.

Another important institutional arrangement affecting legislatures involves quotas. Both Timor-Leste and Indonesia introduced these during their democratisation periods after 2003 and 1999, respectively. This initiative alone accounts for the impressive level of female representation in parliament in Timor-Leste, but recent years have seen a flattening of representation at the required quota level and similarly a limited rise in the number of women in the executive. Indonesia also introduced quotas, but they are for parties (rather than for the legislature) and administered in a manner that allows for loopholes in slating women into political positions. As they give greater jurisdiction to party leaders, they have been less effective. An important recent development is that Timor-Leste has broadened the use of the quota system, introducing quotas for village elections in 2017, which has seen a significant number of elected women at the local level.³ The lack of local elections in many countries, notably Malaysia, Singapore, Myanmar and Thailand, has closed off opportunities to give women experience in public office at local levels. Research has shown that women are finding new paths to office, with more relying on community networks and engaging local issues.⁴ This is especially the case for women not part of the traditional elite and at the local level.

³ See Sara Niner, "Women and Power in Timor's Elections," *New Mandala*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.newmandala.org/women-power-timors-elections/> and https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/Women-and-Political-Leadership-Literature-Review-Timor-Leste_publicPDF3_3_2020.pdf.

⁴ Nankyung Choi, "Women's political pathways in Southeast Asia." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21, no. 2 (2019): 224-248.

Along with institutional conditions, sexist and conservative norms remain barriers for women. Women are expected to follow traditional roles and behaviours. Women are constrained in how they campaign and raise funds and by the multiple roles they hold as part of what is known as a “triple shift” – take care of their family, complete their main source of revenue and campaign for office. Disproportionately there is a focus on the appearance of women, rather than their credentials and the substance of their work. Women are also constrained by stereotypes of how a “good” woman or wife is supposed to behave.

The sad fact is that politics has traditionally not been a welcoming arena for women in the region. It has been described as “dirty” – for “guns and goons” as the Filipinos say. Most of the risks have concentrated around local politics – including death threats – but in recent years the risks have moved to the national level. Women have also recently been openly objectified and vilified with comments, such as Philippine President Duterte’s 2018 comment “we will shoot your vagina,” and apparent approval of rape.⁵ This builds into the increased targeting of women, noted above. In this era of anti-women populist rhetoric, the context for women has worsened in parts of Southeast Asia.

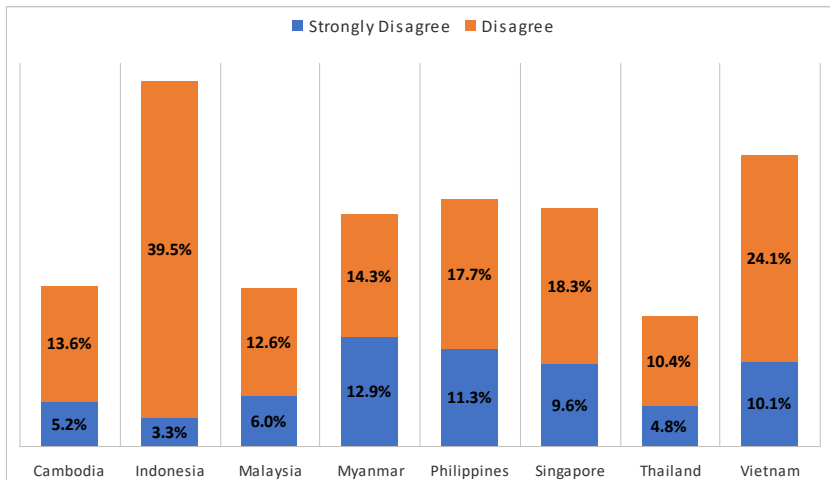
What is striking is that five years on, public attitudes toward accepting women as equals in politics have not shifted positively either. In fact, the trend in some countries is negative. Using findings from the Asia Barometer Survey’s⁶ (ABS’s) recent waves conducted in eight Southeast Asian countries (detailed in Chart 3) we see that there remains a large share of citizens who do not believe that women should equally participate in politics with men. Indonesia leads in opposition to women in politics, with 42.8% not believing in gender political equality (down slightly from 45.3% five years ago). Vietnam follows with over a third (34.1%) opposing gender political equality, then the Philippines (29%), Myanmar (27.2%), and Singapore (26.9). Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia have the most support for women

⁵ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2018/feb/13/shoot-vagina-philippines-president-duterte-communist-female-rebels-video>.

⁶ The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) is conducted in eight Southeast Asian countries. It is currently in its 5th wave (2018-2020), with two surveys outstanding, Cambodia and Singapore. For these two countries, the 4th Wave data (2015-2017) was used. For more information on the ABS, see: <http://www.asianbarometer.org/survey>.

in politics – but all three have comparatively low representation of women, especially Thailand. This points to a disconnect between public attitudes and practices. The ABS findings over time show that more Filipinos and Singaporeans are strongly against women in politics compared to five years ago, with the latter reporting an increase of 7.3% opposition across the latest available ABS waves. As the number of women in Singaporean politics has increased, so has public opposition to their presence. Vietnam also has a marked increase of opposition to women equally participating in politics, up 11.3% compared to earlier waves.

Chart 3. Resistance to Equal Political Participation of Women in Selected Southeast Asian Countries.



Source: Asian Barometer Survey, Waves IV-V.

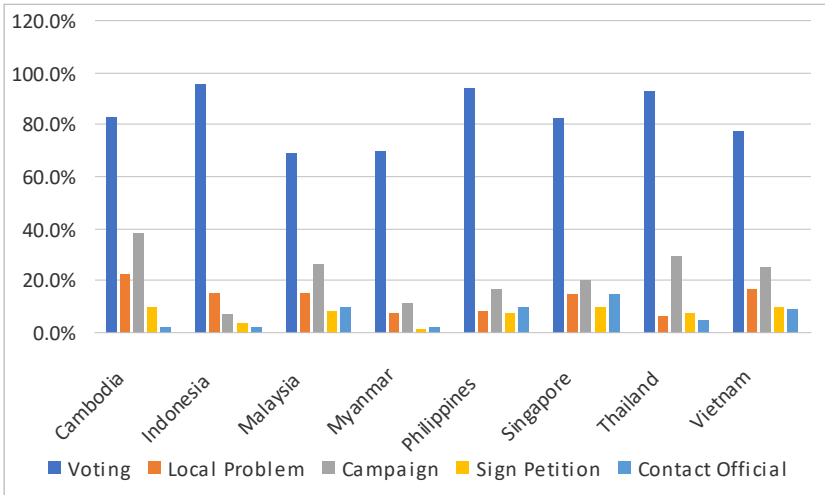
The trends in public support show that hurdles for greater female political participation extend into society. More needs to be done to change attitudes, so as to reverse public resistance to female participation.

Engaged Politically: Voting and Political Participation

One of the approaches to shift these attitudes involves capitalising on other changes taking place in the participation of women. Data from the Asian Barometer Survey shows that ordinary women are participating in politics, especially voting. In Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines and

Thailand more than 80% of women vote – as shown in Chart 4. In recent elections, women voters were decisive in returning Joko Widodo to power in Indonesia in 2019.

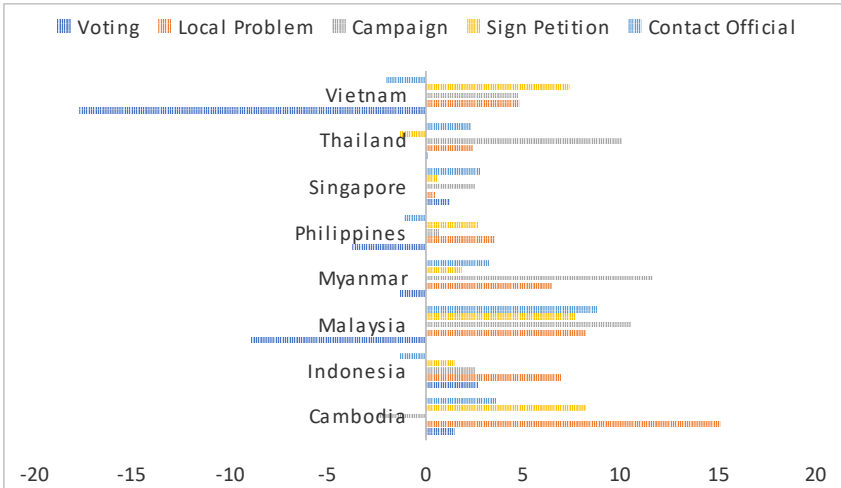
Chart 4. Ordinary Female Participation in Politics in Selected Southeast Asian Countries.



Women also participate in other ways, but at considerably lower levels. More than 20% of women participate in electoral campaigns in Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. More than 20% of women in Cambodia also engage local problems as well. The area where women participate less is in contacting local officials – in part because many of the offices are staffed by men. Overall, the latest figures point to modest increases in the participation of ordinary women in politics.

There are continued gender gaps in the political participation of women, detailed below in Chart 5. Malaysia and Myanmar have the largest gaps, with more men participating in politics in all areas, except voting, as women vote more than men. This is also the case in Vietnam and the Philippines, emphasising the important role women play in shaping electoral outcomes.

Chart 5. Gender Gaps in Political Participation in Selected Southeast Asia Countries.



Source: Asian Barometer Survey, Waves IV-V.

There is considerable variation across countries. Singapore has the lowest gender gaps in participation (although it also has the lowest level of reported political participation), followed by the Philippines. In Myanmar and Thailand the largest gap involves participating in a campaign, while in Cambodia and Indonesia the largest gap surrounds solving local problems. More women contact officials in Vietnam and Indonesia, while more women sign petitions in Thailand, in stark contrast to Vietnam. This variation highlights the central role that local contexts play in shaping participation. More can be done to address these gaps, with outreach and creating awareness. A key step to bringing more women into politics is to engage underlying factors discouraging female participation at the local level – values and norms as well as exclusion of women in policies and government outreach.

Five years on from the initial study, the trends are not encouraging. While Southeast Asia continues to be above the global average in terms of female participation in politics, trends have flattened and gaps in participation extend from the executive to local community participation. There is a need to rethink how to break down the barriers and differences, to move the trend in a needed upward direction.