

Asia's Roaring Tigresses – Female Performance in Asia's Super Election Year 2004



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Looking into recent election analyses and public reports, something is striking. If we talk about elections, we quite often think straight about democracies as both seem linked to each other. We demand elections to be free, fair, equal and general, meaning inclusive and representative for the concerned electorate. But till the beginning of the 20th century, the history of democracy and democratic elections is characterised rather by exclusiveness in active and passive voting rights – only a small circle of citizens can vote or may be elected for office. This is even truer for women as the majority of them only received their voting rights after the Second World War or in the wake of decolonisation. In this year, elections for local or national parliaments as well as head of state or government will and have been held in nine Asian countries – Afghanistan, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, South Korea and Taiwan. For 2005 parliamentary elections are scheduled for Afghanistan and Thailand. The election year 2004 is characterised by a surprising trend: the dominance of female top politicians on their way to power as opposition leaders or, as acting prime minister or president, on their way to a

second term in office. But this is not a new phenomenon at all: the world's first PM, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, comes to power in Sri Lanka in 1960, followed in 1966 by Indira Gandhi in India, one of the biggest Asian countries. From the late 80s onwards the trend of frequent female political leadership in Asia increases. So let us take now a closer look at recent election results and prospects of Asia's Election Super Year 2004 regarding female political representation and participation.

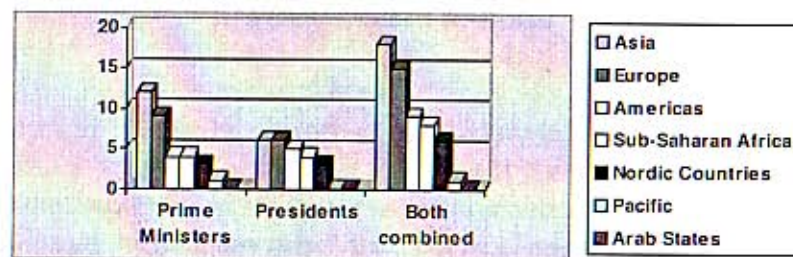


Table : Women Presidents and Prime Ministers by region (1945-11.2003)

It is striking how many governments or opposition movements in Northeast, Southeast and South Asia have been, or are led by women: they were and are party president, opposition leader, minister or head of government. However, the political and socio-cultural context does tell a different story what makes the phenomenon of female political leadership in Asia even more remarkable to European eyes:

- ✓ Asian women have leading roles in the struggle against dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, and they have taken part as well in competitive elections. Democratisation processes were and are till today led

by women: in Bangladesh, Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and the Philippines.

- ✓ There are huge differences of the respective nation states in terms of economic development, culture (religion) and political systems with most cases occurring in developing countries. We find female leaders in predominantly Buddhist, Hindu, Christian as well as Confucianism or Islamic countries.
- ✓ The societies in the region are considered patriarchal and paternalistic, gender relations – as a component of general social and political change – seems to take place only at the margins.
- ✓ None of the respective national governments can claim to have a particularly women-friendly political record.
- ✓ The proportion of women in other political institutions and organisations such as parliaments or parties is comparatively low.
- ✓ The *gender-related development index GDI* ranges between 0,4 and 0,725 (Industrialised Countries: 0,9) and the *gender empowerment measure GEM* ranges even lower: between 0,25-0,4 (Europe/OSCE: 0,65).
- ✓ Every Islamic country in the region except Brunei has produced a female leader. Even in post-Taliban Afghanistan women are reconquering the political space. Although data on the Afghan presidential election has to be read very careful due to multiple and fraudulent registration, roughly one third of the 10,5 Mio. registered voters are women. One reason might

be the importance given to the election in the Afghan population as well as the fact that elections were held in a gender-segregated way with different election rooms for women and men. But what is even more important is that among the 18 candidates Massuda Jalal, a former doctor of Tajik origin, is Afghanistan's first ever female presidential candidate. One might think she serves as a kind of fig leaf for the democratic claim of election organizers, but Massuda Jalal is not an anybody and we have to consider the symbolic input of her candidacy and election campaign. In June 2002 she run for presiding the Loja Dschirga and became second after Karzai whom she criticises for giving posts to warlords and being a US-American proxy, thus damaging the public reputation of democracy. In an interview she referred to her election claim: "I don't have blood on my hands, I haven't destroyed any cities. If the process were democratic and free from interference of warlords and their money, I could say that I would triumph in the election." This is remarkably also due to the threats candidates as well as voters face and will face in next year's parliamentary elections and remarkably comparing with Arabic Islamic regimes poor record of female political representation and participation.

The most well known (living) female political top leaders in Asia are: Sheikh Hasina Wajed + Begum Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh, Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, Sonia Gandhi in India, Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail in Malaysia, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Corazon C. Aquino + Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo from the Philippines, Chandrika Kumaratunga

in Sri Lanka. All have gained their current position as presidents, ministers or opposition leaders because of their descent from influential families. They are all daughters or widows of former government or opposition leaders, and sometimes already the second female leader in line (Sri Lanka). Therefore they share a dynastic descent and the fact of gaining their political position in a hereditary-like manner.

At the moment, three women are leading their respective countries and govern in South and Southeast Asia: Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh, the recently re-elected President of the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, and Chandrika Kumaratunga in Sri Lanka. After the surprising landslide-victory of the Indian National Congress Party in the parliamentary elections of May 2004 Sonia Gandhi, the Italian born widow of Indira Gandhi's son Rajiv, was close to become the prime minister of the biggest democracy world wide, as some of her party members liked to call her. In response to threats, boycotts and xenophobic accusations from the Hindu-fundamentalist opposition regarding her foreign origin and dynastic background, she refused to take over office. This refusal brought her a second victory, a moral one which boosted her reputation among the so called "small people" who constitute the decisive electorate, who perceive politicians much too often as power-hungry and corrupt. Only few months later, she is considered one of India's kingmakers. But female top politicians in Asia are also to be found on the forefront of political opposition in several countries:

- ✓ Aung San Suu Kyi, winner of the Burmese elections in 1990, who is the overall accepted leader of the democracy movement despite her continuous house arrest;

- ✓ Wan Azizah Wan Ismail in Malaysia who fought for the liberation of her formerly jailed husband Anwar Ibrahim and who is since the late 90s head of the opposition movement Barisan Alternatif and was just re-elected to parliament in March this year;
- ✓ Benazir Bhutto, twice Prime Minister of Pakistan and head of the Pakistan People's Party, whose party won the elections in October 2002 – despite BB's self-imposed exile and her disqualification as a parliamentary candidate by the Musharraf-Regime;
- ✓ Sheikh Hasina Wajed who is fighting now for more than one and a half decade with her fierce rival, Khaleda Zia, the current prime minister of Bangladesh, over the country's top office. The opposing parties fight is quite rough, involving apart from oral abuses use of violent means as recently seen in the assassination attempt against Sheikh Hasina.
- ✓ And last but not least, Park Geun-hye, party leader of the Grand National Party (GNP) and daughter of the former dictator Park Chung-hee, in South Korea.

All these women have in common their democratic legitimisation as each of them has been confirmed in her formal or informal position by elections – a quite outstanding act in this region. But one should not forget about the huge gap between female political top leadership and general female political participation in the political spheres and the level of empowerment of the respective countries. Across the region women constitute 15,5% of members of parliament and senate – compared to 18% in Europe and America and 39,7% in Scandinavia – and actually less than half of what is demanded by the United Nations by its

criteria of a critical mass of 33% female representation in legislative bodies.

Country	Parliament				Senate			
	Year	Seats	Women	% / #	Year	Seats	Women	% / #
Afghanistan	06/2005	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hong Kong /China	09/2004	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
India	04/2004	541	45	8.3%	11/2002	242	25	10.3%
Indonesia	04/2004	550	61	11.1%	-	-	-	-
Malaysia	03/2004	219	20	9.1%	2003	70	18	25.7%
Philippines	05/2004	220	36	16.4%	05/2001	24	3	12.5%
South Korea	04/2004	239	39	13.0%	-	-	-	-
Sri Lanka	04/2004	225	11	4.9%	-	-	-	-
Taiwan (in 2004)	2001	217	48	22.1%	-	-	-	-
Thailand	01/2001	500	46	9.2%	03/2000	200	21	10.5%

Table : Female political representation in Asian countries with elections in 2004/2005

Let's take a look at the following tables of female political representation in some Asian countries. Current gender-specific data regarding the composition of legislatures in Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Taiwan is missing. One frequent tool to annul the gender-related democracy deficit in the political field is quota regulations which do exist in different mouldings and regulation depth in nearly all Asian countries where elections are held in 2004/2005.

- ✓ *Afghanistan*: The new constitution of Afghanistan from 2004 includes a majority voting system with quotas for female representatives in both houses: Women should at least constitute 25,6% of members in the *Wolesi Jirga* (Parliament) and at least 17% in the *Meshrano Jirga* (Council of Elders, nominated by the country's president).

- ✓ *India:* A compulsory quota regulation of 33% (73rd + 74th constitutional amendment) is only codified in India's majority voting system for local bodies (*panchayats*). A legislative initiative for equivalent quota regulations on politically more relevant regional and national legislative levels could not secure sufficient support.
- ✓ *Indonesia:* Since February 2003 the new Indonesian election system of proportional representation foresees a compulsory quota of 30% on party lists. In theory, every party has to ensure that in each election district this quota is fulfilled at its candidacy lists – but this tool doesn't ensure an increased representation of women as party officials might simply add 30% of female candidates at the bottom of the list instead of a more enhancing system of cross nomination.
- ✓ *Philippines:* The Party list-Law of 1995 stipulates that women are "considered" on partisan candidacy lists. Moreover, 20% of all seats in the house of representatives should be given to representatives of marginalised groups – and women are considered of belonging to a marginalised group. At the beginning of the nineties the Women Empowerment-Act-Initiative lobbied to introduce a one-third-quota for all legislative bodies and governments elected under the majority voting system, but it remains an unsuccessful topic of the political agenda of women's groups and members of parliament.

- ✓ *Sri Lanka:* You probably know better than me that there have been several unsuccessful attempts between 1998 and 2002 in your country to introduce a compulsory 25%-quota for women into Sri Lanka's proportional election system. Such provisions always encountered resistance by Tamil and Muslim party leaders who justified it with a lack of an appropriate and sufficient female candidacy pool.
- ✓ *South Korea:* In South Korea's semi-proportional election system, no specific gender quotas do exist. Only the oppositional *Grand National Party* (GNP) practices a voluntary 30% on its candidacy lists.
- ✓ *Taiwan:* The constitution of Taiwan stipulates reserved seats for women in each legislative body without specifying the exact number so that reserved seats vary among 10% to 25% in the various bodies. The *Democratic Progressive Party* (MCT) as well as the *Chinese Nationalist Party* (KMT) do have since the 1990s a voluntary 25%-quota provision for their candidacy lists.
- ✓ *Thailand:* In Thailand's majority voting system no quota provisions are codified although the Democratic Party (DP) strives for a 30%-quota among its candidates.

The trend remains when it comes to the field of political participation: there's a huge discrepancy between Asia's successful female top politicians and a marginalised majority of political active women. Except for Japan in 1993, no woman ever presided over an Asian national parliament. In the national governments,

women only constitute a small minority of cabinet members or ministers: 5, 9% in Indonesia, 6, 5% in South Korea, 5, 7% in Taiwan. Higher Numbers can only be found in India with 10, 1% and Malaysia with 10% (in 2003). This gender-specific dichotomy does not change when it comes to female political participation in the party systems of the respective countries. Although we can find prominent female politicians leading parties in South, Southeast and East Asian countries like Bangladesh, Burma, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and South Korea, female party members have hardly any say when it comes to influencing party policies, raising autonomously agenda issues or participating in the top level decision-making process. Bangladesh is exemplary for the region: only 5, 1% of executive council posts are held by women. In the 90s women constituted throughout several elections taking place in India in average 6,53% of candidates, in Sri Lanka 3,9%, in Bangladesh 1,69% and in Pakistan 1,71% (changed with introduction of a quota system in 2002 elections). One can therefore conclude that there is no trickle-down-effect generated by female political top leadership and decision-making from the upper party- and government level down to the lower levels of political life and decision-making which partly needs to be blamed on the female politicians themselves who often came to power with the support of women organisations and lobby groups and lack of adequate positive measures such as quota systems on party lists or reserved seats.

How did female top politicians perform in the recently held elections throughout Asia? On a world wide scale, the frequency of female top candidates in elections remains surprising – especially in countries with a misogyny socio-political context like Afghanistan and Pakistan which both have a strong quota

system on different legislative levels but where women still find it very difficult to exercise their active and passive voting rights.

The image one gets when analysing female performance in recent Asian elections is a mixed one. On the one side we have definitely winners, on the other hand losers, but some winners are not convincing us regarding democratic credibility and political performance, especially having in mind the general systemic under representation of women in political relevant decision-making processes of legislative and executive bodies as well as in intermediary organisations.

Sonia Gandhi is definitely on the positive winner side after having led the Indian National Congress Party to unexpected victory (United Progressive Alliance 220 seats, BJP National Democratic Alliance 185 seats) after nearly a decade of political sidelining. The lasting symbolic strength of the Nehru-Gandhi-Dynasty was once again proven with her children Rahul and Priyanka, who is handled as a coming political star in part due to her resemblance with Indira Gandhi, supporting her mother on the election trail. Her victory is mainly due to her strong campaigning in the Indian country side and away from the modern middle classes and globalization winners. Despite the opposition's attacks on her foreign origin and threats, which eventually led to her refusal to become the next prime minister despite support of her party and sympathisers, she convinced the electorate and remains as Member of Parliament and head of party an influential king-maker on India's political scene. One example is the posting of her chosen candidate, Manmohan Singh, a former finance

minister, as the first Prime Minister of Sikh origin in a highly symbolic act as it was Sikhs who killed her mother-in-law Indira. Singh himself calls Sonia an important figure and an unifying factor within the Congress.

The picture turns in to more shades of grey when one looks to Indonesia and Megawati who has come under heavy criticism for her poor presidential performance, especially in issues of democratisation and economic recovery, and for the endemic corruption under her administration. This is clearly mirrored in the election results of April this year: Megawati's PDI-P lost up to one third of votes and seats compared to the election results of 1999 and become second strongest after GOLKAR, the party of former dictator Suharto. In the first round of presidential elections on 5th of July she became second after her mainly military competitors former General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) and ahead of General Wiranto of GOLKAR, but lost the second round 39% to 61% against.

The rather poor performance of Wan Azizah Wan Ismail's opposition party Barisan Alternatif has to be seen in a different light: The ruling UMNO party of PM Badawi, the follower of long time PM Mahathir, could entirely design the election process to its own advantage - from announcing the election date with very short notice which only left a little bit more than a week of election campaigning to controlling the public media. This disadvantageous competition context and the split of the opposition coalition and the negatively perception of the remaining coalition partner, the Islamic party, have to be seen as decisive factors for significant vote losses of Barisan Alternatif (from 45

seats, 43,5%, in 1999, to 21, 33,6% in 2004). Wan Azizah's Keadilan party was especially severely hit as it could only secure one fourth of its mandates - in figures: 1 of formerly five seats which was won by Wan Azizah herself in the former election district of her then still jailed husband Anwar Ibrahim.

The third female opposition leader in Asia's election year, South Korea's Park Geun-hye, who is the first female party leader in thirty years since last March, lacks a positive election record, too: her conservative Grand National Party lost 12% of its seats (121 instead of 137 seats) while president Roh's Uri party tripled its seats from 49 to 152. The reasons can mainly be found in the negatively perceived impeachment procedure against the progressive President Roh by the electorate as well as due to the rampant party corruption and lack of reform on the side of the oppositional Grand National Party - challenges which Park Geun-hye assumes as the major tasks of her party leadership.

Sometimes a victory can have a bittersweet taste as it is the case of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's recent re-election as president of the Philippines with an advance of one million votes (as was Fidel Ramos in 1992! GMA: 12, 9 Mio. votes, former film star Ferdinand Poe 11, 78 Mio. votes; her vice-presidential candidate de Castro 15, 1 Mio. votes, Poe's candidate Legarda 14, 21 Mio. Votes - both nearly 2, 5 Mio. votes more than their running mates!). Due to fraud allegations from the opposing Ferdinand Poe up to Gloria's swearing-in ceremony, the election results remained a hot potato until their final congressional confirmation in the night of 24th of June and even after. During the election campaign up to 200 people were killed and numerous election irregularities reported apart

from the fact that various groups challenged Gloria's second run for office as unconstitutional as a Filipino president is only allowed to one term in office.

Another Iron Lady can be found in Sri Lanka where the ruling president, Chandrika Kumaratunga (SLFP), daughter of the world's first female PM Sirimavo Bandaranaike, won a decisive power struggle over her Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe of the opposing UNP regarding issues of a possible peace deal with the Tamil Tigers. After dismissing the majority of Wickramasinghe's cabinet, Chandrika Kumaratunga called for early elections on April 2nd which were conducted free and fairly and which were won by Chandrika's SLFP who was the front campaigner for her party. With winning over 105 of 225 seats, she could implement her own PM favourite, Mahinda Rajapakse, and consolidate her power basis.

Which conclusions can be drawn so far from female political participation in Asia's super election year 2004/2005?

1. The majority of female top politicians performed rather well and could defend their offices or power basis, as was the case of Chandrika Kumaratunga, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and Sonia Gandhi. But no trickle-down-effect takes place from the upper levels of governance to legislative bodies.
2. The opposition politicians Wan Azizah of Malaysia and Park Geun-hye of South Korea had to face decisive losses in votes and seats due to differing reasons.

3. For the upcoming elections in 2004-2005 one can hardly expect a significant change of the political under-representation and marginalised political participation of women, despite newly introduced quota systems as is the case of Afghanistan.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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