

# MALAYSIA

Malaysia is a Federation consisting of eleven states of peninsular Malaysia and the two states of Sarawak and Sabah located on the northern coast of the island of Kalimantan (Borneo). Commanding the Malacca Strait, one of the world's main sea-lanes, the Malay peninsula has historically been a point of contact between peoples from other parts of Asia, a fact which finds reflection in its ethnically and culturally diverse population. Today, more than half its inhabitants are Malays, speakers of an Austronesian language called Malay and predominantly Muslim. Another third of the population is made up of people of Chinese origin who are followers of Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism. There is a significant minority of South Asians, especially Tamils from South India and Sri Lanka, who tend to be adherents of Hinduism. In addition, there are various indigenous tribal peoples, some of whom still practise traditional faiths.

Under human habitation for at least six thousand years, the Malay peninsula saw the formation of small kingdoms in the second and third centuries AD, at which time contacts with India were initiated, beginning a millennium of Indian influence over the region. In medieval times, the Islamic city state of Malacca, protected by the Chinese government, was a major commercial and Islamic religious centre, until its capture by the Portuguese in 1511. A century later, the Dutch wrested control of the colony. The seventeenth century also saw the arrival in Malaya of Minangkabau peoples from Sumatra, who brought with them a matrilineal culture.

British colonial activity in Malaya can be traced back to the founding of a settlement on Singapore island in 1819. By the late nineteenth century, the British had established the Straits Settlements, had placed advisors in the Malay states and had begun investing heavily in the Malayan region, developing transportation and rubber plantations. Chinese migrants were by now arriving in growing numbers.

After the Second World War (during which Malaya was under Japanese occupation), the British tried to organise the Malay states into a single entity. A Malayan nationalist movement opposed to the continuation of colonial rule took shape; the pre-eminent anti-colonial force, the United Malaya National Organization (UMNO), was founded in 1946. In 1955, UMNO headed a coalition which won 51 out of 52 seats in Parliamentary Elections. Independence came two years later, and by 1963 the composition of the Federation of Malaysia had been established after several shifts.

At the summit of the Malaysian governmental structure is the Yang di Pertuan Agong, a constitutional monarch elected once every five years from among the sultans, the hereditary Malay rulers of nine of the

states. But under the Constitution adopted at the time of independence in 1957, real political power rests with the Prime Minister, his or her Cabinet and the bicameral federal legislature. The Lower House, or Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives), is a body of 69 members directly elected on the basis of universal adult suffrage for up to five-year terms. In the upper house, or Dewan Negara, there sit 192 members; each state is represented by two Senators, elected by the State Legislative Assemblies, and the balance is made up of nominations by the Yang di Pertuan Agong.

Malaysia's party system is dominated by the National Front (Barisan Nasional), a coalition of largely ethnic-based parties which has been in power continuously since 1957. Its major constituent is UMNO, headed by Mahathir Mohamed, the nation's long-serving Prime Minister. Opposition to the National Front comes from such organisations as the Democratic Action Party and the Parti Islam SeMalaysia, an Islamic party that governs one state. In General Elections held in April 1995, the ruling National Front swept back to power with 162 seats out of 192 in the Lower House and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed began his fifth consecutive term in office.

Given the complexities of a multi-ethnic society, national integration poses a special challenge. The political system can be said to be dominated by inter-ethnic elite accommodation in which competing interests and demands are thrashed out and decisions reached behind closed doors by the leaders of the parties representing the various communities. Public mobilisation behind what could be considered as ethnically sensitive issues is discouraged.

### **Women in Politics**

Despite efforts by political parties to increase the proportion of women actively involved in politics, women remain underrepresented in the national parliament as well as in state legislatures. Following the 1995 General Elections, women occupy only 15 out of 192 seats (7.8 per cent of the total) in the Dewan Rakyat. In the upper house, they constitute 12 of the 69 members, or 17.4 per cent. In the cabinet, there are 2 women ministers out of a total of 25. Of 30 Deputy Ministers, only three are women. At the state level, women hold 22 assembly seats out of a total of 450 and 7 out of 80 positions on State Executive Councils.

This situation co-exists with high rates of primary membership by women in the nation's political parties. In the UMNO, for example, women constitute more than 50 per cent of total membership. The party's women's wing, Wanita UMNO, has been pressing for increased party nominations of women candidates. Similar efforts have been made by the women's wings of other components of the National Front.

**DATO SERI RAFIDAH AZIZ***Minister of International Trade and Industry**Former Minister of Public Enterprises**Former Deputy Minister of Finance**Former Head of Wanita UMNO (UMNO's Women's Wing)*

Back in 1976, Rafidah Aziz, a university lecturer and one of the first women economists in Malaysia, was surprised to learn from the then Prime Minister, Tun Hussein Onn, that he wanted to appoint her as a Parliamentary Secretary. Rafidah, who was doing well in her job, was not about to throw away her academic career for the uncertainties of a life in politics. She told Tun Hussein Onn that she was not interested in a one-off political appointment, and that if this was what was envisaged she would prefer to remain serving the party, UMNO, as an ordinary member.

The Prime Minister assured her that he had bigger plans for her. She would hold the Parliamentary Secretary position for only a year, using it as a training ground for her subsequent appointment as a Deputy Minister – provided, of course, that she performed. On this understanding, she accepted the job, resigned from the university, and a year later found herself promoted to Deputy Minister of Finance – the first woman in Malaysia to be appointed to an economic ministry at such a senior level. By 1980, she was in the cabinet as Minister of Public Enterprise. In 1987, she became Minister of Trade and Industry; three years later, in a period of growth of industrial exports and direct foreign investment, her portfolio was changed to International Trade and Industry. Today, she is counted among the ablest members of the Mahathir Cabinet.

If any were needed, Rafidah Aziz provides proof of the ability of women politicians not only to reach the top, but also to perform outstandingly in relation to “hard” portfolios traditionally seen as the domain of men.

**Early Life**

Rafidah Aziz, a Malay by ethnic origin, was born in 1943 into a family with a tradition of political involvement; her father was active in UMNO's youth wing. After completing school, she enrolled as a student of economics at the University of Malaya. Here, she involved herself in student politics, taking a special interest in women's issues and the cooperative movement.

As a Malay woman student reading economics, she soon attracted the attention of national women's groups, including the Wanita UMNO. When she was in her second year at university, she was asked by the National Council of Women's Organisations (NCWO) to help plan for the establishment of a women's bureau within the government. By the time of her graduation in 1966, she was addressing public meetings and giving radio talks on economics, consumer issues, household budgeting

and rural development. This made her the only Malay woman to talk about subjects conventionally seen as men's domain, and she was actively courted by the Wanita UMNO, the NCWO and other organisations.

### **Entry into Politics**

In 1966, Rafidah became a Vice-President of NCWO and joined UMNO, together with other colleagues at the university. She was soon elected to the deputy leadership of the Petaling Jaya branch of Wanita UMNO where the University of Malaya was located. Not long after this, she was appointed to the Economics Bureau of Wanita UMNO and to the Economics Bureau of the main party.

Meanwhile, she pursued her academic career, gaining her Master's degree and in 1970 her promotion to assistant lecturer. Three years later she was promoted to lecturer and head of the Rural Development Division of the Economics Faculty. During this period, she developed her interest in Malaysia's co-operative movement. This eventually led to her election as Vice-President of ANGKASA, the Malaysian national cooperative organisation which was to bring together thousands of cooperatives across the country.

The first half of the 1970s saw Rafidah actively involved in public speaking, giving talks to women's organisations and addressing a variety of public fora on economic and development issues. She also led Malaysian delegations to international gatherings of the co-operative movement. At the party level, she was involved in policy making within the economics bureau, where she took a special interest in rural development and in promoting Malay participation in commerce and industry.

### **Rise to the Top**

It was against this background that Rafidah made her spectacular political ascent in the second half of the 1970s. In 1976, at the invitation of Prime Minister Tun Hussein Onn, she resigned her university job and was appointed to the national Senate to enable her to hold the position of Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Public Enterprise. A year later, she was Deputy Minister of Finance, a post she held for the next two years.

In the 1978 General Elections, Rafidah was asked by Tun Hussein Onn to stand for a parliamentary seat in the state of Selangor. By an impressively wide margin she defeated her main opponent, a well-known trade union activist from the opposition Democratic Action Party.

Following a cabinet reshuffle in 1980, Rafidah entered the Mahathir cabinet as Minister of Public Enterprises. She remained charged with this portfolio for the next seven years. Then in 1987, at a time when Malaysia was transforming its economic base from agriculture to manufacturing and the government was vigorously promoting direct foreign investment and the export of manufactured goods, Rafidah was appointed Minister of

Trade and Industry. Her portfolio was redesignated International Trade and Industry in 1990.

Parallel with her rise in government, Rafidah established her political clout within the structures of UMNO. In the late 1970s, while she was still only a Senator, she won the second highest number of votes in the fight for a seat on the UMNO Supreme Council – a major achievement for a young woman who at that time lacked position in either state or national government.

In 1980, following her appointment to the cabinet, she defeated a senior party leader from Selangor to become Deputy Leader of Wanita UMNO, a position which gave her a crucial national-level political base. Four years later, when the incumbent head of the Women's Wing retired, Rafidah competed for the post and won. She would remain head of Wanita UMNO until 1996, when she was defeated by the Deputy Minister of Health, Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, in an election outcome that reportedly took delegates by surprise.

Despite this setback, Rafidah Aziz continues to enjoy acclaim for her ministerial skills and her performance in high office. In Malaysia, she is widely seen as having risen on the basis of her own merit and technical competence rather than through political connections.

### **Enabling Factors**

Rafidah Aziz regards her family not only as her primary commitment – ranking above both party and nation – but also as the pivotal factor behind her success. The support her husband and three children give her is, she says, reciprocated by the priority she places on them: “My children have never resented my absence from home because I’ve made it a point to phone them every other night before bedtime to discuss their school work, examinations and social activities.”

She has also to shield family and home from political intrusion: “I do bring work home”, she concedes, “but I don’t allow any visitors to the house to discuss work or party matters. My time with the family is too precious to waste on other people’s applications for one thing or another.”

Beyond her family, Rafidah singles out the support she has been able to count on from her cabinet colleagues. “I thrived in the nurturing environment provided by cabinet colleagues who saw me as a young, smart woman with much to contribute. Their support and encouragement gave me confidence and motivated me to work hard for the party and the government.”

### **Perspective on Women in Politics**

Rafidah argues that if greater numbers of women are to embark on political careers, changes in strategy have to be adopted at two primary levels: that of the political party and that of women themselves.

As far as the party is concerned, she says that vigorous efforts need to be made to prepare women for leadership positions, give them experience at branch level, ensure that they figure on lists of candidates, and get them elected by, where necessary, “parachuting” them into safe seats.

In her view, UMNO has performed creditably in all these areas. Citing the practice of the party’s women’s wing, she says it makes a point of identifying women with potential and either entrusting them with party responsibilities or helping them on to local councils or local development committees. Their performance is then monitored closely, and the names of those judged to have done particularly well are passed on up the party structure for consideration as potential national or state parliamentary candidates. And while the final selections of candidates is the prerogative of the party president, the leader of Wanita UMNO has a strong say in the choice of women candidates.

To get more women into public life, says Rafidah, it may be necessary to “parachute” them into seats they stand a good chance of winning. Reviewing her own experience, she recalls that when she was allotted the parliamentary seat at Selayang, she was a committee member of the Petaling Jaya branch of UMNO, located many miles away on the other side of Kuala Lumpur. There was considerable opposition to her candidacy from within the Selayang Division, but she was able to defeat the opposition candidate. In 1982, she was “parachuted” to another seat, this time in her home state of Perak.

Rafidah believes that political parties that are seriously committed to involving greater numbers of women must go out of their way to recognise and reward merit, irrespective of gender. In particular, they should not allow their political judgement to be clouded by the lobbying, money power and mud-slinging associated with old-style, male-dominated politics.

But women, too, must develop awareness of what the situation requires of them. Rafidah stresses that women entering politics must be prepared to be combative and tough. “In my own case,” she says, “I had a tough time gaining acceptance by the party leadership in the Selayang division – that, too, in the short time before polling day. But I persevered.”

At the same time, her own experience has led her to the belief that women should not embroil themselves in the “hassle and heartbreak” of fighting for position and challenging incumbents at the level of local politics. Rather than aggrieve local party leaders by usurping their position, women like herself who want to make a mark on national politics should reach out towards a national platform. Rafidah in fact frowns on women who get embroiled in all-out leadership contests, arguing that this is often at the expense of service and principles – qualities that are important to her.

She says, too, that she has made it a point not to resort to “feminine wiles” in order to get her way. Her approach to work and to the discussion of issues and party policy has been straightforward and direct, helping

her male colleagues to view her as an equal and as a person in her own right. Women who want to succeed in politics, she affirms, must cultivate professionalism, a capacity for long hours, and a readiness to commit themselves to the service of both party and government.

## **DATO KEE PHAIK CHEEN**

*Penang State Minister of Tourism, Youth, Sports and Women's Affairs  
Most Senior Member of the Penang State Executive Council  
Chairperson of the Women's Wing of the Gerakan Party*

Among the officials with whom she has worked, Kee Phaik Cheen is known as the politician to whom one “never says no.” To the residents of her rural constituency – fisherfolk, farmers, petty traders and hawkers – she is highly respected for her ability to serve the community and deliver the goods. This woman politician from Malaysia’s Chinese community has built her career on the foundation of a grass roots activism that has embraced concerns as mundane as rubbish collection and clearing clogged drains. Hers has been a steady, step-by-step ascent to state-level office and national political prominence. Currently the most senior minister in the cabinet of Penang state, she is also national chairperson of the women’s wing of the Gerakan Party, the dominant partner in the Barisan Nasional coalition ruling in Penang.

### **Early Life and Entry into Politics**

Kee Phaik Cheen was born in Penang in 1947. She graduated from the University of Malaya in 1971 and took up a teaching post in the state of Selangor. Later she became the supervisor of a secondary school in Penang, but resigned the job in 1977 because of ill health.

By this time she was married to a medical doctor, also of Chinese ethnic origin. He had been a member of the Penang State Assembly since 1974, and she had helped him in his election campaigning. This had brought her into contact with the women’s wing of UMNO. She was impressed by the discipline, dedication and hard work of these predominantly ethnic Malay women. They readily accepted her husband, a Chinese from another political party, and actively campaigned for him to ensure a Barisan Nasional victory.

On polling day, the Malay women were first at the poll, lining up to vote even before the station opened. Non-Malays, including the local ethnic Chinese community, in contrast seemed intent on finishing their marketing and household chores. Dismayed by this apparent political apathy, Kee Phaik Cheen determined to combat it.

Her first step was to join the Gerakan Party; she was at that time one of just a handful of woman graduate members. When, in 1979, the party

decided to open a women's wing, she became actively involved in the planning. As the coordinator for women members in Penang, she organised the women in each constituency of the state assembly to form *pro tem* committees. The women's wing was finally launched in 1982.

### Work at the Grass Roots

By the early 1980s, Kee was an appointed Gerakan member of Penang's Municipal Council. Her husband was no longer active in politics, having made the decision in 1978 to concentrate on his medical practice. As a councillor, she adopted as her constituency a multiracial rural area that had formed part of her husband's state assembly seat. Unlike many of her colleagues, she was able to devote herself to her constituents – farmers, fisherfolk, hawkers and petty traders – on a full-time basis. Her husband's financial as well as moral support enabled her to manage on the modest allowance that councillors were paid.

What started as a one-year single term appointment to the council stretched into six years. In her constituency, Kee opened a contact centre in a vacant office adjacent to her husband's clinic and encouraged ordinary working people to drop in with their problems and grievances. And while she actively involved herself in urban beautification schemes aimed at transforming Penang into a garden city, much of her time was spent tackling mundane problems such as refuse collection, clearing drains and repairing roads.

For Gerakan appointees, council work was used as a training ground for political workers who showed electoral promise. Determined to make a difference, Kee earned herself a reputation as a hard worker who was able to deliver results. She badgered the bureaucracy to speed up its decision-making and take action to solve the problems of her constituents.

In 1984, after serving four one-year terms as a city councillor, Kee decided to challenge the incumbent chairperson of her party branch. (In Malaysia, a party branch covers the area of a state assembly seat, while a division covers a parliamentary constituency.) The result showed that her hard work in her rural constituency had paid off: the working people she had helped had joined Gerakan and they supported her in the party election. She duly won – the first woman in Gerakan to be elected to such a post.

Four months later, she challenged the sitting chairperson of her division, who, conscious of the support behind her, opted to withdraw from the contest.

Kee's rise in the local party structure and her work at the community level soon brought her to the attention of Gerakan's national leadership. In 1985, she was appointed national chairperson of the party's women's wing. Unhappy that the position was an appointed one, she was instrumental in getting the party constitution amended so as to provide for

elections. She then organised the women's wing's first leadership election, which she won.

### **Rise to the Top**

In 1986, after serving six years as a councillor, Kee was selected to stand as a candidate in elections to the state assembly. She was given the choice of two seats within the Balik Pulau parliamentary constituency; with her level of grass roots support, it was believed, she could win either of them. She duly joined the Penang State Assembly, making it a point to continue her efforts on behalf of her constituents. She expanded the service centre in her constituency and employed three full-time staff to help her.

In 1990, Kee joined the Penang State Executive Council (State Cabinet) as Minister of Tourism, Youth, Sports and Women's Affairs. There was nothing "soft" about this appointment: in Penang, tourism is the second most important economic sector. As a member of the executive council, Kee was able to organise "technical visits" to various areas of her constituency. Here, accompanied by government officials, she would conduct what were essentially meet-the-people sessions. As a result, civil servants saw for themselves the problems faced by the people and issued instructions for speedy action to be taken. Her constituents found their demands for better roads, community halls and other civic amenities seriously taken up.

In 1995, Kee was designated the most senior member of the state executive council. This places her third in the state government hierarchy, after the Chief Minister and the Deputy Chief Minister.

### **Enabling Factors**

Kee's husband has been a crucial source of inspiration and support in her political career. It was his political involvement that helped her discover her own interest in politics. His subsequent decision to underwrite her political career both emotionally and financially, enabled her to develop her talents and pursue grass roots politics with an unusual degree of focus and dedication.

Kee has also derived much support from her children, whom she taught from an early age to be confident and independent. Her political career did, however, bring problems in its wake. Her teenage daughter at first resented her mother's choice of career, telling her friends at school that they should never allow their mothers to enter politics. But mother and daughter were able to discuss the problem openly. The daughter has coped by addressing her mother as "The Honourable" whenever she feels neglected. "That", says Kee, "never fails to make me sit up and pay her more attention."

Kee identifies the Penang Chief Minister as another key source of support, along with many of her women colleagues in the Gerakan party.

## Perspective on Women in Politics

For Kee, the crucial element in a strategy to get more women into politics is to ensure that women involve themselves in solid work at the grass roots. She views this as more important than affirmative action, although she concedes that more conscious efforts need to be made at the party level to involve women and aid their political ascent.

As a result of her six years in local government, Kee says, she knew exactly what to do, where to go, and whom to see to get the problems of her constituents addressed and solved. This experience at the grass roots enabled her to shoulder her subsequent responsibilities as a State Legislator and Minister faster and more effectively than would otherwise have been the case.

Her record as an effective grass roots party worker also served to place her in good standing with male party colleagues. "I was judged and selected strictly on merit," she affirms. "This was important to me because I wanted to be treated as an equal and not as the product of a quota system."

At the same time, she recognises that women politicians need special encouragement. As one who has actively educated and lobbied for women candidates, she argues that political parties need to make a more conscious effort to appoint women candidates and generally foster female talent. "In my own case," she says, "I've helped prepare five women councillors in four different states by identifying the talented women in the party and giving them exposure – appointing them to bureaus dealing with education, local government, fundraising and so on."

These appointments, she believes, provided women with opportunities to prove themselves. Those who proved particularly talented could then be given greater responsibilities. They could also be encouraged to take up part-time professional courses in order to augment and strengthen their qualifications.

Within the Gerakan party, Kee points out, there are signs of growing sensitivity to the issue of involving women. Back in 1990 she was the only woman candidate on the party list. But by the time of the 1995 general elections the Party President selected four women candidates – three for state assembly seats and one for parliament. Two were successful, and she expects the number of Gerakan women candidates steadily to rise. "No party leader with any common sense," she argues, "would turn away a talented person who will be a strong asset to the party."

At a more basic level, Kee believes more attention needs to be paid to helping women overcome their sense that politics is an alien world. While in her experience many professional women are ready to help political parties with specific projects on an ad hoc basis, rarely are they prepared to chart a career in politics. "With a professional career and children, many women feel they just don't have the time to spare for politics. They

see it as an alien field that demands hard work and time and that is detrimental to their marriage and family.” By way of a strategy, Kee advocates time management training for women with children: “They need to focus on quality time if they want to get involved in politics and not feel guilty about neglecting the family.”

## **DATO NAPSIAH OMAR**

*State Minister for Public Works in Negeri Sembilan*

*Former Central Minister of National Unity and Social Development*

*Former Central Minister of Public Enterprises*

*Former Central Deputy Minister of Housing and Local Government*

*Deputy Leader of Wanita UMNO*

Napsiah Omar, formerly Malaysia’s Minister of National Unity and Social Development and currently Minister of Public Works in the state of Negeri Sembilan, says her entry into politics was a case of being in the right place at the right time. Born into a family of UMNO activists, she had always been interested in politics, but had never thought of a career in public life.

Then, in the run-up to the 1982 general elections, UMNO found itself with a problem in a Negeri Sembilan constituency. The incumbent, who headed a division of the party and was also a former Chief Minister of the state, had by virtue of a tarnished reputation become a political liability. Determined to hold on to his seat, he issued a challenge that he would step down only if someone could be found who was better qualified than he was – an unlikely prospect given that most other senior party leaders in the division were humble schoolteachers.

Those determined to oust him decided to call his bluff. They told him they had found someone more highly qualified than himself – a university professor and a woman, to boot! This was none other than Napsiah Omar, a zoologist and botanist and an UMNO party member with long experience of working with women at the grass roots level.

Napsiah duly resigned her university job and stood for election. Readily welcomed by male party workers in the division, she found herself campaigning in mosques and *suraus* (village prayer halls), often given place of honour next to the imam to deliver her campaign speech at the end of a prayer session. No doubt to the dismay of the ousted incumbent, she won the seat by a generous margin.

She would go on to serve in various cabinet posts at both the national and the provincial level. And she would play a crucial role in overturning gender stereotypes, presenting women in Malaysia with a positive role model of the politically active woman.

## Early Life

Napsiah was born in 1943 in the state of Negeri Sembilan. Her parents were active supporters of UMNO who made it a point to attend every party function in their village and the surrounding area. Napsiah performed well at school and went on to study zoology and botany at the Australian National University. She also obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in Nutrition and Education from Cornell University in the United States.

From 1969 to 1982, she taught at Malaysia's Universiti Pertanian (University of Agriculture), first in the Home and Nutrition Technology Department and later in the Department of Human Studies. In the latter, she was Associate Professor and also Head of Department.

From early in her life, Napsiah felt concern for the plight of women in Malaysia. She saw the need for the empowerment of women to help them overcome traditional acquiescence in their lot and become active shapers of their lives. She involved herself in community work and, making use of her expertise in health and nutrition, began giving talks to women's groups. She also followed her students as they carried out their fieldwork in rural areas.

Dismayed at the level of ignorance about health and reproduction rights she found among women, she joined the Family Planning Association and started within it a task force on the status of women.

## Entry into Politics

Napsiah's desire to strengthen her access to women at the grass roots level was a major factor behind her decision, in 1972, to join her local branch of UMNO. This was in Serdang, in the state of Selangor where the agriculture university was located. Once inside the party, she was spurred to growing activism by the subordinate role she saw women forced to play: she felt women were being used as mere vote banks, whether at the level of national, state or party elections.

The frequent talks she gave on health, nutrition and contraception as a member of the Family Planning Association, as a university lecturer and as a member of UMNO brought her to the attention of the UMNO party leadership. One divisional leader who noted her ability advised her to attend divisional meetings more regularly in order to make her presence felt within the local party structure.

At the national level, she began to be invited to attend seminars on leadership and politics. It was at one such meeting that the head of Wanita UMNO (the party's women's wing) noticed her and advised her to shift her party base from Serdang to the town of Kuala Pilah in her home state of Negeri Sembilan. She was told there was a possibility of a vacant seat in the state assembly since the incumbent, a woman, was already serving her second term and might not be reelected.

These events took place in the early 1970s, at a time when Wanita UMNO was striving to attract more women graduates as members and get them into party leadership positions or chosen as election candidates.

In Kuala Pilah, a small town in which Napsiah was well known and respected, party colleagues were by the early 1980s urging her to stand for the position of divisional deputy leader in upcoming party elections. But before this could happen, parliament was dissolved and general elections were called in April 1982. Napsiah was asked to consider running for the state assembly. Before she could even consider this, there came the offer – out of the blue – of the parliamentary seat with the disgraced incumbent. Much to her own astonishment, Napsiah found herself a member of Malaysia's National Parliament.

### **Rise to the Top**

Further surprise followed. When Mahathir Mohamed announced his new ministerial team in the wake of the elections, Napsiah was included as Deputy Minister of Housing and Local Government. As the Minister in charge of the portfolio spent much of his time involved in party work, Napsiah ended up handling the bulk of ministerial work. She also answered parliamentary questions. The result was that she quickly learned on the job, rising to public as well as party prominence during the five years she held the post.

Within UMNO, too, Napsiah advanced at a rapid pace. By 1986, she held several party posts. At the branch level, she was elected head of Wanita UMNO, and she subsequently became divisional head of the organisation. At the national level, she was elected to Wanita UMNO's executive council and also joined the Finance and Information Bureau of UMNO. In 1987, she won a much coveted seat on the party's Supreme Council, the highest policy-making body. She was also appointed Chairperson of UMNO's National Unity Bureau.

Following a cabinet reshuffle in 1987, she was appointed Minister of Public Enterprises. At this time, Rafidah Aziz was Minister of Trade and Industry. This meant that the two women in the cabinet were both heading economic ministries – breaking the tradition that women confine themselves to ministries handling welfare and social issues.

In 1990, Napsiah stood for election as deputy leader of Wanita UMNO, defeating the incumbent, a Deputy Minister who was more senior not only in age but also in party and governmental experience.

The cabinet reshuffle that followed the 1990 general elections saw her appointed as head of the newly established Ministry of National Unity and Social Development. Here she gained a reputation for her forthright positions on such issues as child labour and women's rights. During her five years at the Ministry, she earned the respect of women's groups and non-governmental organisations as well as the party for her strong com-

mitment to the cause of the less privileged. She came to be seen as the caring face of government and as a politician who was not afraid to speak out and, if necessary, tread on toes.

In the General Elections of April 1995 she did not stand for parliament, contesting instead for the Negeri Sembilan State Assembly. This led to comment and speculation, with some of her critics interpreting the move as a demotion. However, Napsiah was one of four cabinet ministers to be transferred to State Assembly seats, and it was widely expected that they would become chief ministers. She no longer holds the Public Works portfolio in Negeri Sembilan but remains as deputy leader of Wanita UMNO.

### **Enabling Factors**

Napsiah identifies the support given her over the years by the top leadership of UMNO as a major factor in her political career. "With no financial resources at my disposal," she says, "I found such support invaluable. It gave me far greater clout."

### **Perspective on Women in Politics**

Napsiah is a strong advocate of tackling generalised apathy among women towards politics by motivating, in the first place, educated women who can be persuaded into some level of activism. Such women, she says, are "confident, politically aware, and willing to fight for their just share of the party power structure." While she concedes that the growing numbers of women graduates and professionals entering UMNO of late tend to be urban-based, she believes they will start a process that will eventually reach the rural areas: "Eventually, such women will be encouraged to stand for party positions back in their home villages. The change in attitude in the rural areas will come through their increasing presence in the branches and divisions."

This strategy, which appears born of her own experience, by no means goes unchallenged within Wanita UMNO, the majority of whose members are not university educated. Efforts by the organisation to recruit more graduate members – for example, the campaign in the early 1970s which brought Napsiah and other professional women into the party – have triggered resentment. Despite this, Napsiah is clear that encouraging the involvement of educated women is the only realistic way to get more women into politics.

As far as party structures are concerned, Napsiah argues for strategies of affirmative action aimed at increasing women's representation in decision-making bodies. She supports the proposal, still under debate within UMNO, to give women a guaranteed minimum level of representation at the annual party assembly. If this proposal is accepted, she says, Wanita UMNO will win a minimum of 165 such delegates – clearly something

that would strengthen the clout of the women's wing within the party. However, the proposal has recently twice been rejected by the party's Supreme Council.

Napsiah also argues for clear strategies to tackle the funding of women hoping to enter politics. Women, she says, have been disadvantaged by their lack of financial resources: "Access to campaign funds is the key to increasing the participation of women in politics."