

Political Campaign and Maternal Leaders: Putting Forward Mother Qualities in Indonesian Legislative Election 2014

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Indonesian *Undang-undang* (Act) no 8 year 2012 about General Election mentions that every political party is obliged to have 30 percent of female legislative candidates in the national, provincial, and district level. According to *Forum Masyarakat Peduli Parlemen* –the citizen community who cares about what happens in the parliament, in 2014, the number of female candidates who participated in the Legislative Election was 2,434 candidates or 37% of the total candidates; the biggest number yet in Indonesian political history. This is a big change in Indonesian political history, as the role of –and the activities in, leadership, especially the governmental leadership has always been always associated with masculinity. Politics is considered as the natural sphere for the males. Traditional masculine traits such as assertive, unemotional, and dominant, are seen as the ideals when it comes to a leadership, as opposed to traditional feminine traits, such as submissive, emotional, and gentle, which are seen as the characteristics of the nurturers who support the community through providing the members' well being.

However, regardless of the fact that it is the country with the biggest Moslem society, and the fact that women are not seen as serious contenders for top political positions because of its de facto/de jure military control (Richter 1991; Wichelen 2006), Megawati led the country from 2001 to 2004. However, her leadership was also close to controversy with her “mother-like” which was associated with her indecisiveness, impulsiveness, attention to details, and according to the political analyst, “unnecessary tolerance for her political opponents” (Unidjaja, Jakarta Post). Richter (1991), in his study on the theories of female leadership in South and Southeast Asia, stated that in the most important political positions accessible to women were because her familial relationship with important male politicians. A woman is also more accepted as a leader if she fills a political void left by a male, and if she is married (p. 4-6). The same goes for Megawati; her leadership is intertwined with her image of a daughter of the former president, Soekarno, and a mother.

Back to the 2014 Legislative Election, the change in the Election rules causes some disputes. Many hold the opinion that the female candidates are recruited by the parties just to meet the percentage requirements, which means neither the quality nor aspiration of the candidates is in the first priority. After recruited, the female candidates who do not have any political experience, are left alone to fight for votes (Asmarani). Moreover, many parties recruit celebrities and *dangdut* singers as the vote-getters by utilizing their beauty and/or sensuality and/or femininity (Susila).

This also means the new act affects the interaction between the female candidates and the voters, as the familiarization and exposure of the female candidates in the public sphere also increase in intensity. When running for a Legislative Election, poster is the media that is most commonly used in the campaign. Posters usually consist of the self photograph, name, and number of the candidate, the name of the party, slogan, and an appeal to vote for the candidate. These posters are usually put along the road so they can be seen by the passing vehicles. A candidate normally has a series of posters along one road to familiarize people with them as a Legislative candidate, as it is common for voters-to-be not to recognize the candidate's vision and mission. In presenting themselves in the public space, the candidates express themselves -through the self-photographs- by unconsciously using their bodies to express their gender and identities. This, also, is affected by the cultural context, which according to Lorber & Moore (2007), "influences not only bodily expressions but their frequency, contexts, and meaning" (p.81). Furthermore, Lorber & Moore also explained that "when people internalize social expectations about gender/sex and the body, it becomes difficult for them to determine whether they construct their gender identities or whether gender/sex expectations begin to construct them" (p. 96-97). The picture of female candidates, therefore, can be seen as the 'gendered bodies' which requires a process of reading the signs of gendered body to the ideal characteristics of a leader. The components of nonverbal communication, such as facial expression, eye contact, body movement, and body adornment can be instinctively encoded by the female candidates/campaign team, as well as instinctively decoded by the voters, to focus on the traits that are considered as possessed by great leaders.

Women running for a political election or female leaders tend to "operate with a different voice" and style than their male counterparts", as in the Asian culture it is much easier to

believe that women can work than to govern (Richter, 1991). With the hope of getting votes, there is a process of image crafting as the suitable candidates to represent the people. Crafting a self image is always in tune with the social convention of what the good characteristics are for a certain gender, for example, a good male characteristic is assertive and confident, and for a good female characteristic is motherly and innocent. While it is difficult to evaluate whether female candidates operate differently compared to the male candidates without having interviews with the candidates themselves on how they encode the “different voice” on their campaign posters, it is equally compelling to find out how the photographs of the female candidates on the campaign posters/billboard are interpreted. The question is whether this “different voice” that is assumedly used by the female candidates is decoded by the voters. Furthermore, it is also interesting to know what characteristics that are favorable for a female leaders (legislative candidates).

Characteristics and traits are identified from their photos, which then perceived by the voters. Preferences are made by identifying the desirable ideal leader traits. Deux and Lewi’s model of Gender Stereotyping (Figure 1.2) shows that physical appearance affected judgements about traits, behavior, and occupations more strongly that it did vice versa (in Brannon, p.170). When Indonesian government specifically mentions that every political party needs to have female representatives, the assumption is that there will be an expectation of psychological traits and characteristics entails.

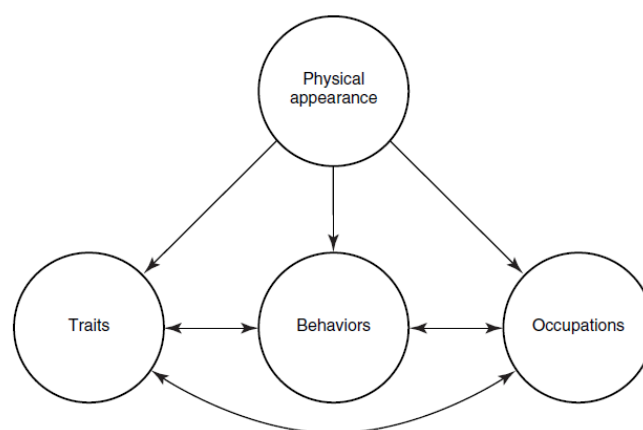


Figure 1: Deux and Lewis Model of Gender Stereotyping

This paper studies how the gendered body is defined and consumed. We pose questions about the people’s perception on the female candidates: What do they consider when choosing a

female candidate as their legislative representative; their performance, or appearance and popularity? Furthermore, what kind of characteristics should the candidate have? Do they prefer a female candidate who shows traditional masculine or feminine traits? The female candidates' posters, then, can be seen as popular culture objects which contain signs which show the meaning or message beyond what they appear to be.

Theoretical Framework

Semiotics as a study that analyzes signs. The signs have meanings, and there are ways to look at the relationship of signs and meanings and how a meaning can be added to a sign. In *Myth Today* (in *Mythologies*), Barthes uses Semiotics to study different cultural phenomena. He develops Saussure's Theory of Signs, which consists of signifiers and signifieds, and their correlation with connotation. Connotations which evolve and are accepted by the society as social conventions will become myths. The understanding of 'Myth' described by Barthes is similar to 'Ideology' developed by Althusser. If a cultural/Social phenomenon which started out as a myth is practiced and experienced on and on, it will be perceived as the normal; the natural; the truth because it is 'meant to be'..

As a visual media, the elements in a poster can reveal the 'decoded' messages with Semiotics analysis. According to Roland Barthes (1967), Semiotics is a study of a system of signs to produce a meaning. A cultural object can be semiotically analyzed to understand its society's convention. Barthes' Semiotics is usually focused on popular cultural objects like films, pop music, video games, and fashion trends. He argues that the signs on these cultural objects are understood and used by the users. He divides the signs to 1. Denotation, or the literal meaning encoded to the signifiers and 2. Connotation, or the meanings that are interpreted and shared by a community/society. People generally are not aware of meanings and discourse that are produced and transformed in popular culture because they are seen as the 'truth', which Barthes called 'Myth' or Ideology. The campaign posters can be seen as a system of signs that can be interpreted and analyzed to reveal the message

The connotations create meanings that are shared by certain groups which have similar values will be Myth.

Method

We did interviews with 60 (sixty) respondents. Each respondent was asked to look at 10

(ten) pictures of female candidates political campaign posters, without looking at the political parties they represent. The ten posters were chosen after classifying the female candidates into 10 different groups, and these posters represent those groups. Afterwards, respondents are asked to choose 3 (three) female candidates that they most likely to vote, as well as the characteristics they identify from the posters. Then, respondents are asked to choose 1 (one) out of the 3 (three) candidates they have chosen, with the reasons why they choose the one and eliminate the other two.



Picture 1: Ten female candidate posters

The answers given by the respondents were recorded and transferred to Excel. These data, then, were counted to identify what characteristics are preferable in voting for a female candidate.

Female Leaders’ Maternal Traits: Efficiency vs Deficiency

In Indonesian society, women are expected not to neglect and forget their *kodrat*, or “their so-called biological or female destiny, which defines women by their domesticity and reproductivity” (Wichelen 2006). *Kodrat* also connects to the *azas kekeluargaan* or family foundation, which is “a model for authority relations within the state” in the New Order era (Robinson, 2009, p.10). After the fall of the New Order, the place of women in the political spheres changed. The assignation of Megawati as President sparked a debate on female leadership between the nationalists and the religious Moslems (Wichelen, 2006). The opposing group posed a question whether female leadership is allowed by the religion, as it is

against women's *kodrat* to their duty and subordination to their husbands and kids.

Eventhough the gender roles and differences in Indonesia has changed throughout the years, the questions about female leadership remain the same: because women's *kodrat* is nurturing the family, can she enter the 'dirty' and 'harsh' Politics environment? Furthermore, can she, with her innate maternal traits, be in the assumably masculine role?

Because politics is always associated with male/public sphere, problematizing female leadership is about questioning the efficiency of feminine traits in leadership roles. The interview with the respondents shows that the first characteristic that is considered as the defect that make the candidates less preferable is the lack in assertiveness. When the respondents perceive this trait from the candidates' pictures, there is a decrease in the probablity that they will vote for her. The lack of assertiveness includes the characteristics such as "less commanding (*kurang berwibawa*), doesn not look bold (*tidak terlihat berani*), too meek (*terlalu kalem*), too patient and gentle (*terlalu sabar*), and submissive (*penurut*). This confirms the preference of stereotypical masculine traits such as assertiveness and boldness are usually as the ideal leaders. This also confirms that the maternal qualities used by women as the nurturer of the children and the family, such as gentleness and patience, is seen as the deficiencies in leadership. The female candidates' signs of gentleness can be seen as the lack of self-confidence and dominance needed in leadership roles.

The second deficiency in maternal traits observed from the photograph is that the candidates posses *ibu-ibu RT* characteristic. *Ibu-Ibu* means women/mothers in the city's neighborhood, and usually are associated with housewives who are good with households chores and like to rant emotionally. It is considered as a defect in the leadership roles because *Ibu-Ibu RT* is the embodiment of captious and emotional women/mothers who stereotypically belong to the domestic sphere. *Ibu-Ibu RT* are exactly the opposite of the stereotypical unemotional masculine leaders who are able to separate feelings from ideas and problems.

Female Leaders: Mix of Masculinity and Femininity

The 5 female representatives with the highest votes are Indah Kurnia, Erline, Hj Nita Gilik, Dewi Surya Rahmah Ayu, and Lucy Kurniasari.



Picture 2: Representatives with the highest votes

From the interview, there is one female candidate, Indah Kurnia that stands out (top position with 62%) because of the respondents' familiarity with her from media coverage (reasons are varied from retrospective voting -what she has done, her characters, and so on, to similarities in belief), and the masculine traits, such as assertiveness, firmness, and seriousness.

However respondents made choices on other candidates solely based on judgement about their pictures, as respondents usually neither know the candidates nor understand their aspirations. This is also true for most Indonesian voters when it comes to choosing legislative candidates. Once they are in the voting chamber, they have to 1. vote a political party, and 2. vote one out of seven to ten candidates from the chosen party. That is why, in order to be memorable, candidates rely on the way they present themselves through a self photo on the campaign posters or billboard. Face expression, body position, and attire are set up to produce a single image that hopefully can show the candidates' political identity in a self photograph on the campaign poster.

Therefore, as this paper studies how respondents decode the signs found in the female candidates' self photographs, it will disregard the characteristics that are connected to the familiarity of the respondents with the candidates.

Preferable characteristics in ideal female leaders, respectively, are Assertive (including bold, firm, brave, and charismatic), Nurturing (including patient, gentle, loving, motherly), Jaunty (including cheerful, friendly, merry, jolly), Humble and Modest, Educated (intelligent, smart), and Beautiful (pretty, graceful). Those characteristics can be divided into stereotypical/traditional Masculine traits (Assertive), Feminine traits (Nurturing, Jaunty, Maidenlike, and Beautiful).

The traditional male's assertiveness is the most favorable trait in choosing people's representatives, which shows that stereotypical masculine traits are still considered essential in leadership roles. However, these masculine traits are followed by the stereotypical feminine traits, which also shows that possessing and displaying masculine traits, and supporting it with feminine traits is preferable for a female leader.

Although the lack of assertiveness is considered the main deficiency of a female leader, other traits that are considered feminine are desirable *if* they already possess the assertiveness. Once they have the firmness, their maternal characteristics such as nurturing, gentle, and patient are seen as efficient for leaders.

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