

Continuity and Change in ASIA

Join us every Wednesday for an insightful look at *Continuity and Change in Asia*, a social studies-based program exploring political and social issues shaping Asia today and designed to encourage students to better understand the various issues shaping the countries and regions of East, South and Southeast Asia. This *Newspapers In Education* program is in partnership with the Asia Outreach Centers at the University of Washington Jackson School of International Studies. Series will run through Wednesday, June 7, 2006.

Activities

- 1:** In *The Seattle Times*, locate articles that mention women with positions of political power from all over the world. How many women do you see represented in the newspaper? Do you think this reflects a true picture of women's participation in global politics? Discuss your thoughts about this issue together as a class.
- 2:** Why do you think that there are fewer women than men in politics? Do you believe this trend will change dramatically in your lifetime? Write an expository essay explaining your ideas on the subject.

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ARTICLE 4

Women's Rise to Power

Southeast Asian Women at the Helm

by Mia Siscawati – Graduate student in sociocultural anthropology, Department of Anthropology, University of Washington

The issue of women's leadership has been in the news recently as voters in Chile and Liberia elected their first female presidents. Why is female leadership an important issue? In many countries, women make up more than half the total population yet few women hold positions of political leadership. Typically, politics is presumed to be male territory, and active discrimination against women keeps women at the margins of political power.

However, women's leadership is not a new concept in Southeast Asia. This region has witnessed the rise of female political leaders over the last twenty years. Scholars who study Southeast Asia have long stressed the high status of women as a distinguishing feature of the region. For example, in the pre-colonial era, Southeast Asian kingdoms were sometimes ruled by their queens. At the community level, there has been a long history of female leadership in medicine, education, farming, and commerce. Also, during the colonial period, many women in Southeast Asian countries joined national independence movements.

What role have Southeast Asian women played in modern-day politics? Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma (Myanmar), Corazon (Cory) Aquino of the Philippines, and Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia

became national leaders after popular rebellions toppled authoritarian governments. Cory Aquino was elected as the first female president in the Philippines and ruled from 1986 to 1992 after challenging the 21-year-long dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. Indonesia's Megawati Sukarnoputri was elected the first female chairperson of a political party in 1993. Her leadership was opposed by the powerful president, General Soeharto (Suharto), who feared her power. Despite Soeharto's opposition, Megawati gained the respect of the Indonesian people. Her political party won the first democratic election held after the authoritarian regime collapsed. Megawati should have been in the presidential chair right after the 1999 election, but a controversy over female leadership initiated by politicians of the Islamic parties spoiled her victory. After a long road, Megawati became Indonesia's first female president in 2001.

Does it matter if a president is a woman? What kind of leaders do Southeast Asian women make? Both Cory Aquino and Megawati Sukarnoputri have unique leadership skills that enabled them to manage their countries in turbulent times. Although neither leader followed feminist or even pro-woman agendas, they made important contributions to the experience of women leaders. As a result, the Philippines elected their second female president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, as well as increasing numbers of female leaders to local government. In Indonesia, Megawati's political roles inspired more women to run for local government offices. During Megawati's presidency, Indonesia saw increasing numbers of democratically elected women as heads of local governments. One of them is a woman named Rustriningsih.

Rustriningsih has been an elected local government leader of the Central Java district of Kebumen,

Indonesia, since 2000. She is highly responsive to the basic needs of the people in her district. Rustriningsih has been building one of the cleanest and most transparent local governments in Indonesia. In a country that has serious problems with corruption, her actions are extraordinary.

Rustriningsih is not alone. In Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries, the number of women who have been democratically elected as heads of regional governments or who serve in local parliaments is increasing. Although the numbers show that women remain under-represented in regional governments across Southeast Asia, they are making their mark with distinctive styles of leadership. Many of them commit to practicing clean governance, and they have begun to pay attention to people's basic needs and women's issues. Their attention to women's issues is important for encouraging more women to participate in politics. With the increasing participation of women in politics, comes the potential to improve the lives of all Southeast Asian women. As the United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs argued in 1992: There is a close reciprocal relationship between the general advancement of women and the participation of women in decision-making.

Questions for discussion:

- How did Southeast Asian women rise to power?
- Does it matter if a president is a woman?
- What kind of leaders do Southeast Asian women make?
- What impact have women leaders had on the societies they have led?

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