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Puan's election as House speaker gets mixed response from feminists

Bills on women expected to be passed under Puan

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Many see the rise of Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) lawmaker Puan Maharani to become the first female House of Representatives speaker as a breakthrough for women's leadership in politics and policy-making.

But while some regard Puan's election positively, feminists seem to have mixed feelings about the issue, with critics attributing her soaring political career to the fact that she is the heir apparent to the leadership of country's largest party.

Devi Asmarani, the cofounder and chief editor of Jakarta-based web magazine and feminism journal *Magdalene*, said Puan's ascent to lead the male-dominated House was not a victory for the feminist movement in the country.

"I think everyone realizes this is an illustration of how strong the oligarchy is in our politics," Devi told *The Jakarta Post*. "Is this a win for feminist? Of course not."

Puan, the daughter of PDI-P matriarch Megawati Soekarnoputri who is longest-serving party leader in the country, is not a new name in politics as she served both as lawmaker and minister before being sworn in as the House speaker for the 2014-2019 legislative term on Tuesday.

The granddaughter of first president Sukarno previously served as coordinating human development and culture minister for nearly five years after PDI-P-backed President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo took office in October 2014.

Devi argued that Puan had achieved little during her five-year tenure as minister and that her track record in politics which Devi said was rather insignificant indicated scant interest in the feminist agenda.

Her sentiment is similar to that of political analysts who regard Puan's performance as a minister as unremarkable compared to other female ministers in Jokowi's Cabinet, such as Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati and Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti.

"[Puan's] rise in politics is merely based on her family's great name and her mother's huge influence," Devi said. "She's done nothing for the women's [rights] agenda [...] I doubt Puan will put more emphasis on women's issues as the House speaker."

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Puan won the popular vote in April's legislative election, gaining 404,034 votes in the Central Java electoral district. The PDI-P, meanwhile, emerged the winner in the race by taking 19.3 percent of the national vote, thereby entitling to the House speakership as per the 2018 Legislative Institutions (MD3) Law.

Analysts say Puan appears to be following in the footsteps of Megawati, who became the first female president of the country in 2001 and served until 2004, arguing that being the House speaker gives her a strong platform for the 2024 presidential race.

Women's rights activist Tunggal Pawestri, meanwhile, acknowledged that Puan was in a rather a privileged position compared to the majority of women who had to struggle while making their way in politics.

However, Tunggal highlighted that Puan's election came without any opposition or criticism of her gender and therefore shed a positive light on the movement to put more women in leadership positions.

"In Indonesia, there was a time when religious leaders and politicians openly rejected women as leaders," Tunggal told the *Post*. "Thus the fact that Puan was elected without any obstacles is a good sign."

Megawati, who years ago called for more women to become involved in politics, was also criticized merely for being a woman during the 2004 and 2009 presidential races, when conservative Muslims said women could not lead.

One of the main things women's rights campaigners expect of Puan as House speaker is to ensure the passage of bills related to women, especially the sexual violence eradication bill, the deliberation of which has been bogged down for years.

"Puan should undeniably show that she is on the side of women's protection and empowerment, so through her position she can make a real contribution to gender equality and justice in national politics," said Titi Anggraini, director of the Association for Elections and Democracy (Perludem).

She said that while it was not wrong for Puan to rise on the political ladder by capitalizing on her relationship to Sukarno, it was now time for Puan to prove she was capable of leading the House.

"Puan should view her position as House speaker not only as a privilege as the election winner, but also as a part of women's movement for equality in politics," Titi said.