Last July, Indonesia held its presidential elections that proclaimed Joko Widodo as the new President. The elections not only heralded a new leadership, but also illustrated the extent of effectiveness of the systems for an equal and diverse political participation instituted by the world’s third largest democracy.

Indonesia has undergone several electoral reforms since 1998 during the Reform Era. Aside from the implementation of several methods of election, guidelines and regulations were created specifically to enhance women representation in Indonesian politics. Since the general elections in 2004, a quota on women candidates has been in force. On the one hand, Law No. 31/2002 states that 30 percent of party boards must be comprised of women. On the other hand, Law No. 12/2003 states that at least 30 percent of parliamentary candidates must be women.

The electoral reforms are considered as a demonstration of Indonesia’s commitment to uphold women’s rights. They are based on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which calls for the right to participation of women in public life, and the Beijing Platform for Action, which calls for the removal of barriers to equal participation. For the 2014 national elections, the Election Commission strictly upheld the reforms by disqualifying parties falling short on women candidates from running in their electoral district. As a result, Indonesia’s 12 competing parties reached the 30 percent candidacy quota – of the 6,576 candidates who ran for office, over 2,400 were women.

The formulation and enforcement of the reforms reflect a positive development in women participation in electoral government in Indonesia, but they also belie salient, yet-to-be-addressed issues. Various cultural, systemic, and structural obstacles still constrain women’s adequate political representation, which in turn limit the response to gender and women’s issues in Indonesia.

Challenges and limitations

There has been a persistent trend of low and inconsistent voting for women candidates across local and national levels in Indonesia. The recent statistics hardly indicate an authentic gender representation, as parliamentary seats are won as long as candidates, be they men or women, obtain the highest number of votes. In addition, the lack of data on women participation in politics and government and limited information about the causes of scant electoral support for women affect women empowerment inputs to public policy.

According to Ani Soetjipto of the University of Indonesia, there have been some disappointments with the electoral participation of women representatives. Compelled to compete within a partisan electoral system, many of them lack political experience, networking, and financial support in order to win. As a result, they become more interested in winning parliament seats at any cost than in viewing their participation in politics as a way of being agents of change and proponents of women’s place in public life. They become no different from their male counterparts in their practice of transactional politics, their aim for instant results, and their lack of understanding of the women’s movement.

The patriarchal culture of Indonesia also limits women’s representation in public life, especially in villages where it is widely believed that a woman’s role should be confined to the household. However, culture is and should not be a determinant of the scope of women’s role in society. As the UN Guidelines on Women’s Empowerment states, “Culture is...a confluence of beliefs and values continuously undergoing processes of change and redefinition in response to external and internal economic, political and social forces. What is called ‘culture’ can sometimes be more accurately understood as the ideas and...
practices valued by the dominant group, often men.”

**Measures and mechanisms**

Greater measures must be undertaken in order to address the under-representation of women in the Indonesian government. One such measure is enhancing consultations with women’s groups and institutions, specifically to address issues and establish mechanisms that would encourage more robust political participation and larger representation of Indonesian women. The perspectives of women and civil society groups matter, as they depict socio-political realities and offer alternatives to improve the status of women both in the private and public spheres. A deeper examination of the collaboration and coordination between government and women’s groups would thus be useful to ascertain how to move forward in women’s empowerment and representation.

According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report of 2013, the Philippines ranked fifth in closing gender gaps while Indonesia ranked 95th. There is a fine opportunity for sharing best practices between the Philippines and Indonesia, which can also be an avenue for deepening their bilateral relations. There is a potential for collaboration between women’s groups in Indonesia and women’s groups and institutions in the Philippines such as the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW).

In addition, the Philippines could share one of its initiatives for women empowerment and leadership enshrined in the Magna Carta of Women (R.A. 9710), which calls for the integration of women in political parties. It cites that “the State shall provide incentives to political parties with women’s agenda. It shall likewise encourage the integration of women in their leadership hierarchy internal policy-making structures, appointive, and electoral nominating processes.” Incentives, such as funds for supporting women and gender development programs of political parties, are one example. Perhaps parties may be more amenable to including women candidates in their roster if they also applied the same principle of incentives, thus keeping a positive approach to involving women in the political process.

There are many lessons that can be learned from Indonesia’s experience, particularly from the continuing struggle for active participation of women in politics and other societal affairs. By closely examining the positive initiatives and the systemic and structural obstacles that continue to impede the advancement of women representation, ASEAN countries could assess the initiatives applicable to their respective political systems to include more women and hopefully breakdown the cultural and systemic barriers to fully realize the capability of women in all sectors.