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A nudge for S'poreans to counter racial prejudice

MINORITY REPRESENTATION IN THE ELECTED PRESIDENCY

Should the Elected Presidency (EP) system provide for a reserved election for minority candidates? Or would this go against our principle of meritocracy and be a step back for multiracialism? Both arguments were made at the public hearings of the Constitutional Commission that is reviewing aspects of the EP.

In his comments, Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, as the chairman of the commission, asked if having an ethnic qualification in the EP was a "nudge" or "speed bump" in moving Singapore towards being a race-blind society. Here, the Institute of Policy Studies researchers who made these points explain their views.



The Constitutional Commission's public hearing on the Elected Presidency at the Supreme Court in April. The reality that voters might be race conscious must be acknowledged, even if Singaporeans generally assert that we function according to the ideals of our pledge, 'regardless of race, language and religion'.
PHOTO: KOH MUI FONG



MATHEW MATHEWS

Safeguards for minority representation in the Elected Presidency (EP) will not impede Singapore's vision of being a society where race has no bearing on what one can achieve. Rather, having these provisions will further entrench in society the value of multiracialism and demonstrate a commitment to ensuring minority representation, even when it entails changing the existing system.

The President is a unifying force in our multiracial society. As such, minority representation in the presidency is crucial. It cannot be coincidental that Singapore's first three presidents were racial minorities: President Yusof Ishak, a Malay; President Benjamin Sheares, a Eurasian; and President Devan Nair, an Indian. It was only after we had three minority presidents that President Wee Kim Wee, a Chinese, was sworn into office.

At that early juncture of our nation building, it was important to symbolically position the multiracial character of our society through the presidency. The successive minority presidents amplified, both locally and internationally through the many ceremonial duties that they discharged, the positive regard that a majority Chinese population accorded to minorities.

Overall, the diverse racial representation of presidents emphasised that there were individuals of different races who could embody the best virtues of Singapore. Their portraits, as such, were worth beholding.

With the establishment of the EP, the system has required that citizens, and not Parliament, choose a competent individual who can, among other things, safeguard the national reserves and ensure the integrity of top civil servants. It is understandable that citizens would want the freedom to choose an individual who they believe would best perform these tasks.

However, the vagaries of elections may not serve our national interest of ensuring continued minority representation in the presidency. Although minority representation has never been explicitly spelt out in the Constitution as a necessary aspect of the presidency, there has been a long historical precedent to this and popular expectation which cannot be ignored.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

As such, in my proposal to the Constitutional Commission on the EP, I called for a safeguard to the system. I proposed that if a particular race has not been represented in the presidency for a substantially long period, there should be a restricted election for candidates of that particular race.

MERITS OF A RESTRICTED ELECTION

Why the need for this provision?

First, there is a much smaller probability that a minority candidate for the EP meets the criteria necessarily imposed by the Presidential Elections Committee, simply owing to the demographics of Singapore's population. This will automatically mean there will be fewer minorities who can stand for a presidential election.

There is little wisdom in removing the eligibility qualifications, such as the candidate having held significant positions that gave them oversight of large amounts of finances. Such competencies are crucial for discharging the office of the Elected President.

Second, we must acknowledge the reality that voters might be race conscious, even if Singaporeans generally assert that we function according to the ideals of our pledge "regardless of race, language and religion".

In parliamentary elections, there are different and significant identities that a minority candidate can take on beyond his race, most prominently his party affiliation.

Voters who might be uncomfortable with their elected representative being of a different racial group may still vote based on the programmes and policies that the representative's party aim to deliver.

The presidential candidate, however, does not campaign extensively and is non-partisan. Under these contexts, there is the temptation for voters to consider the race of the candidate and potentially the associated stereotypes .



Singapore's 2011 presidential candidates during a Mediacorp TV programme (from left to right): Mr Tan Cheng Bock, Mr Tan Jee Say, Mr Tony Tan and Mr Tan Kin Lian. The presidential candidate does not campaign extensively and is non-partisan. Under these contexts, there is the temptation for voters to consider the race of the candidate and, potentially, the associated stereotypes. TODAY FILE PHOTO

For instance, a minority-race President might be viewed as being more interested in issues faced by minorities or not have sufficient gravitas compared with a majority-race President.

Research on race in Singapore does show that while the ideology of multiracialism is widely accepted, we are not free from racial prejudice. I am afraid that few distinguished minorities would want to enter into a contest where they are unsure if their race would be a factor in voters' decision-making process.

LACK OF MINORITY-RACE PRESIDENT RAISES ISSUES

It would be a great loss to Singapore if one of our main constituent races does not become represented in the presidential office for a long time.

That raises numerous issues, such as why that community has no suitable qualified candidates or whether some groups are only unelectable based on current systems.

It can foster perceptions of exclusion among minority groups who may feel that nobody from their community is deemed deserving of such high national honour.

By extension, it can, albeit inaccurately, amplify that their race is not sufficiently respected within Singapore. Such an outcome is disconcerting to the fabric of any cohesive society, unless systems are refined.

I much prefer that we do not have to resort to such systems, and that Presidents from all the main racial groups can be elected through successive unrestricted elections because there are sufficient pools of esteemed individuals from all communities who are well regarded by Singaporeans.

However, I think that it is unwise for us as a multiracial society not to pre-empt this risk and make provisions for them, especially when it is evident that our current system has not been able to produce a Malay President for many years.

The merits of a restricted election, which will allow us to see a President from an unrepresented racial group, far outweigh the concerns that such action will showcase the fact that some groups have difficulty becoming elected.

The population is more likely to notice that we have not had a President from a particular background for many years compared with how he or she became President.

RESTRICTED ELECTION AS STOP-GAP MEASURE

By the same token, I am not inclined towards mechanisms that will automatically guarantee that minorities be elected, which some have argued for.

Their suggestions are to have a rotation of Presidents by their racial groups or a team of Presidents akin to the Group Representation Constituency system, where there will be sufficient minority representation.

My hope is that if we have to use the provisions of a safeguard to ensure the representation of any racial group in the presidency, it will be used only once and as a stop-gap measure. A President that comes through this mechanism will hopefully display to Singaporeans the dignity and competence that he or she has, and by extension, other qualified members of his or her community.

This then will be the much needed reference point in future elections in which Singaporeans might be tempted to consider the racial background of a presidential candidate. This will provide the nudge for Singaporeans to seek ways individually and collectively to counter any remaining vestiges of racial prejudice.

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