

# Panellists at forum debate reserved election

Ahead of the first presidential election reserved for Malay candidates, panellists at an Institute of Policy Studies forum discussed the significance of the change and its impact.

Law Minister K. Shanmugam said the change was critical given the

president's role as a unifying symbol of a multiracial nation.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing said the decision on who qualifies to stand is the Presidential Elections Committee's to make.

Senior Minister of State Janil Puthucheary said whether the next president was elected in a contest or walkover, he or she had to be a president for all Singaporeans.

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# Reserved elections 'critical as president serves unifying role'

Post may be called into question if president always comes from the same race, says Shanmugam

**Elgin Toh**

The changes to the elected presidency to ensure multiracial representation are important because of the president's role as a "unifying symbol of the country", Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam said yesterday.

Without amendments to reserve elections for minorities, this symbolic role may be called into question – especially if "the president, term after term, comes from a single race", he added.

He acknowledged that some Singaporeans do not agree with the idea of reserved elections – but he noticed many would come around after being given the full facts.

Still, this is an issue on which "reasonable people can differ" he said, adding: "The fact that we were able to talk about it, debate it... in a way it helps strengthen the overall multiracial fabric."

Mr Shanmugam was speaking at an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) forum on the reserved presidential election.

He covered a range of issues related to the presidency, including the stricter qualifying criteria for private-sector candidates and how a candidate's race is determined.

His remarks come as Singapore gets ready to elect its next president on Sept 23. Only Malay candidates can take part in this election, under new laws that reserve the election for a community, if no one from that community has been president for the last five terms.

The minister also disclosed the initial plans were to reserve elections for two groups: the Malays, as well as Indian and Other communities. But feedback from the Chinese ground prompted the inclusion of Chinese reserved elections.

"When we discussed it with our MPs, past MPs, the Chinese intelligentsia, the Chinese media, the reaction was quite clear. If you have reservations for the Indians and the Malays, you better have reservation for the Chinese," he said.

On the president's symbolic role, Mr Shanmugam noted it has been



part and parcel of the presidency since independence.

When the roles of safeguarding past reserves and the integrity of the public service were added to the presidency in 1991, the symbolic role was not "abrogated", he said, adding that in Britain, the most important role of the queen is also to represent and symbolise the nation.

The minister also cited evidence that race remains a factor when Singaporeans vote, making it harder for minority candidates to be elected president.

A survey by IPS and Channel NewsAsia last year showed among the Chinese, 96 per cent accept a Chinese president, but only 59 per cent accept a Malay president.

Such race differences are common worldwide, but many countries prefer a laissez-faire approach

on race by the government. Some of them, including Germany and Britain, have in recent years acknowledged that such an approach has not enhanced integration.

In contrast, Singapore takes an interventionist approach, in the belief that leaving things to nature is dangerous because "the powerful forces (in society) are centrifugal", he said.

Interventions in Singapore include the introduction of group representation constituencies, race quotas in public housing and the outlawing of speech that hurts racial or religious sentiments.

Reserved elections are another step in this direction, he said, as he slammed critics for labelling these multiracial policies "the nonsense of 'race'". This interventionist approach works, he said, noting: "You

look at the state of our race relations in Singapore. I am prepared to compare that record against any other country. Compare it against the best in class. Our record speaks for itself."

A forum participant asked if the role of prime minister could be reserved for minorities, too.

Mr Shanmugam said there is a spectrum, ranging from complete laissez-faire to reservations for all posts. Singapore has chosen "a mixed system", with some reservations, he said.

"Whether you want to go all the way is a question of... what is doable, what the people will accept and also whether you need it... to strengthen our multiracial environment," he said.

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Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam speaking at an Institute of Policy Studies forum on the reserved election. He cited evidence that race is still a factor when Singaporeans vote, making it harder for minority candidates to be elected president. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

# Question of who is Malay continues to be raised

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**Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh**

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As Singapore gets ready for its first presidential election reserved for Malay candidates, the question of who is a Malay has surfaced.

The issue was the focus of a panel at the Institute of Policy Studies forum on the reserved election, with speakers noting that the three presidential hopefuls continue to be dogged by doubts about their race.

They have declared themselves members of the Malay community, but some note Mr Farid Khan's identity card states he is Pakistani, and Madam Halimah Yacob and Mr Salleh Marican have Indian fathers.

Under the Constitution, a person is a member of the community he considers himself part of, and if he is accepted as such by the community, with a Community Committee making this call.

Ancestry, said ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute fellow Norshahril Saat, is a point that has cropped up in online discussions on what makes a person a Malay. But, he said: "If you follow ancestry strictly, then no candidate would qualify as a Malay. Inter-ethnic marriages have made this perspective irrelevant, and it is difficult to find a pure Malay."

Another view is that a person is Malay if he speaks Malay, follows Malay customs and is Muslim. Dr Norshahril said in Singapore, there are many sub-ethnic groups – such as Javanese – subsumed under the Malay category. "What binds them together is religion, language and Malay culture. Some Indian Muslims and Pakistanis associate themselves with Malays. They speak the language, practise Malay culture and the Malays accept them as such."

But law professor Kevin Tan asked whether a person born into a Malay family who decides to leave Islam would be accepted as a Malay. Dr Norshahril said: "I am not sure if the community is ready. If you look at the sentiment on the ground today... you must be a Muslim."

Lianhe Zaobao editor Goh Sin Teck said questions have also been raised when it comes to defining a Chinese. Religion does not play a definite role, and "the fact that you can't speak a word of Chinese doesn't mean you are not Chinese".

Asked by a participant if a person can identify as belonging to two races, Prof Tan said to laughter: "So long as you are accepted by the communities of those two races."

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# Walkover or not, 'president represents all S'poreans'

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**Charissa Yong**  
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Whether Singapore's next president is elected in a contest or a walkover, he or she must be a president for all Singaporeans, said Senior Minister of State Janil Puthucheary.

But Dr Janil said he did not have an answer to whether a contested or uncontested election was better, a question he was asked during an Institute of Policy Studies forum yesterday on the reserved presidential election.

Mr Zainul Abidin Rasheed, a former senior minister of state who was at the forum, noted that the reserved election was introduced to make all Singaporeans feel included.

But it had "opened a can of worms", and discussions during the



Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing (from left), forum moderator Gillian Koh and Senior Minister of State Janil Puthucheary at an Institute of Policy Studies forum on the reserved presidential election. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

forum showed there is "a lot of division among Malays, among non-Malays", said Mr Zainul.

To avoid such divisions, he asked, was it better to have a contest or not have a contest?

It was not lost on the forum's participants that the election, to be held on Sept 23, may be a walkover, as two of the three presidential hopefuls do not immediately meet the criteria to run for the highest office in the land.

Former Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob is the only one who will automatically get the nod.

"The nominees are there, the process is there, we will have to see what happens," said Dr Janil, who is in the Ministry of Communications and Information, as well as Education.

His fellow panel member, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office

Chan Chun Sing, addressed a similar question on how to reconcile people's desire to vote with the possibility that the stricter standards now may see only one person qualifying.

The decision is for the Presidential Elections Committee to make, said Mr Chan.

But he argued that ensuring a contest should not come at the expense of relaxing the eligibility criteria for any single group.

"I can understand Singaporeans' aspirations to have a contest and more people contesting. But I don't think Singaporeans would like to have different rules for different races," said Mr Chan.

This would shift the balance too far in favour of multiracialism, without sufficient regard for meritocracy, he added.

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