

## Do people vote along racial lines? The Constitutional Commission hears differing views

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Prohibiting political parties from endorsing presidential candidates, and allowing voters to rank their choices based on their first and second preferences were among the new ideas heard on the third day of public hearings by the Constitutional Commission to review the Elected Presidency.

Similar to previous sessions, much of the discussion on Tuesday (Apr 26) centred on the issue of minority representation, with three out of the four contributors cautioning against being overly prescriptive in approach.

First to present their ideas were researchers with the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Dr Gillian Koh and Mr Tan Min Wei, who fielded questions from the Commission for more than an hour – the longest among those who spoke on Tuesday.

They submitted that the eligibility of candidates should be based on merit rather than on ethnicity. Even in a situation where an election has been reserved for minority groups, and the candidates have qualified after undergoing stringent checks, some voters may view such as contest as unrepresentative, Dr Koh said.

She explained that the issue of being representative is “critically important”, due to the two key veto powers of the President, which have to do with the use of Government reserves and key civil service appointments. “We don’t want any of that tainted by the idea that this person would veto people who are not of his kind. It’s not in our eyes, but in the eyes of the citizens that matter. They are the final repository of legitimacy in the system,” she said.

### DIFFERING VIEWS ON WHETHER PEOPLE VOTE ALONG RACIAL LINES

Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, who is chairing the Commission, asked if the system could give the process a nudge “once in a while”, perhaps until Singapore reaches an ideal stage where people do not vote along racial lines. He highlighted a point made in a previous session by contributor Dr Mathew Mathews, who had suggested reserving elections for a particular group, if there has not been a President from this community for 25 to 30 years.

In her rebuttal, Dr Koh pointed out that there is no present data to suggest people vote along racial lines in presidential elections. She also highlighted a post-2011 survey conducted by IPS on some 2,000 voters, which showed that 85 per cent of respondents said they agreed, or strongly agreed that a person of an ethnic minority group can be elected through the current system.

Human rights group MARUAH was similarly opposed to resorting to constitutional measures in order to guarantee minority representation. Represented by Ms Braema Mathi and Mr Ngiam Shih Tung, the group sparked a lively exchange with the Constitutional Commission. Ms Mathi explained that based on studies done, there is evidence that the ethnicity may not be an identity marker for the electorate.

“Sometimes (the idea of) minority may not come into the picture, but because we have groups that are looking out for the minority communities, whether it is a group like the AMP (Association of Muslim Professionals), or MENDAKI, or MUIS, or a group related to the Indian community or the Eurasian (community) ... the views seem to come in to say that this is important,” she said. “From a sociological perspective, I think they are evolving and we will get better. But state agenda on this issue ... seems to say that minority discussion is important for our elected presidency,” she said.

Ms Mathi added that if minority representation is indeed an issue, it should be solved upstream – through policies in schools and at workplaces – to allow people to “rise up through the system”.

In response, Member of the Commission Professor Chan Heng Chee said that ensuring minority representation is a question of “demonstrating inclusiveness” in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-racial society. “Is it so unwise to try to design something, an arrangement where in fact you can deal with this, and to try and help every ethnic group to achieve the highest office of the land?” she asked.

She added: “I would put it to you too, in countries where in the past, they have said they don’t want to look at ethnicity. Given (as you said) the changing world where ethnicities, race, religion, become very important, they have had to scramble and address in their own way, and call it by its name – that it is about multi-racialism, it is about ethnicity, it is about religion.”

The third set of contributors in line were assistant Professors of Law at National University of Singapore, Dr Jaclyn Neo and Ms Swati Jhaveri, who focused their proposals entirely on improving minority representation. Citing empirical evidence from other countries, Dr Neo said that if left to free elections, people tend to vote along racial lines, leaving minority ethnic communities feeling politically disenfranchised.

The duo suggested replacing the presidency with a three-person ‘Council of Presidents’- echoing a similar point raised by the Eurasian Association last week. At least two from this Council will come from minority ethnic groups. The Council would rotate their term of Presidency, each serving a two-year term. The other two would sit as elected members of the Council of Presidential Advisers.

Professor Chan questioned if the suggestion was suitable for Singapore, as the concept of rotating presidents is typically seen in societies torn apart by conflict, she said. She also expressed doubt that the two-year term would be sufficient for the President to foster ties of affection with Singaporeans, which is one of his prescribed roles.

## **SECOND ROUND OF VOTING FOR CLOSE CONTESTS?**

Other suggestions that stood out on Tuesday were Dr Koh and Mr Tan’s proposal to ensure that closely fought contests be subject to a revote, and Asst Prof Jack Lee’s proposal to prohibit political parties from endorsing presidential candidates. While both ideas were not new in and of themselves, they were raised for the first time in the course of the public hearings.

Dr Koh and Mr Lee felt that their suggestion of a supplementary vote system, or an instant runoff vote, can help “ensure that the mandate of the eventual office holder can be structured on the basis of more than just a hair’s breadth of an electoral margin should there be multiple, equally credible candidates in a contest”.

In the last presidential elections in 2011, Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam won with 35.2 per cent of the votes, beating Dr Tan Cheng Bock with a slim margin of victory of about 0.3 per cent.

Meanwhile, Asst Prof Lee said his suggestion to bar parties from publicly backing candidates would help to ensure that the office of the President remains non-partisan. He added that it would be “undesirable” for a minister or a member of Parliament to make statements on particular candidates, as it would be very hard for the public to tell if they were speaking in a political, or personal capacity.

“The views of some people may carry more weight than the views of other people, and then we might not want to have this distorting effect,” he added.

The Constitutional Commission’s public hearings continues into its final day next Friday (May 6).