

Govt needs to help educate people on role and functions of President: Analysts

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Changes to the Elected Presidency proposed by the Constitutional Commission provide a clearer picture on the requirements for prospective candidates, but the Government needs to help people better understand the functions and role of the President, analysts told Channel NewsAsia.

Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director (Research) at the Institute of Policy Studies, noted the Commission's recommendation to revise criteria for private-sector candidates, such that they must have held a senior executive position in a company with S\$500 million in shareholders equity. "In terms of whether ratcheting up the criteria limits the pool, we understand that when the criteria was set at S\$100 million in paid-up capital, that already represented the top 0.2 per cent of companies that were registered in Singapore. So raising it up now to S\$500 million in shareholder equity, we are told by the Constitutional Commission that it is still pegged to the order of 0.2 per cent to 0.23 per cent of all companies incorporated in Singapore. So that benchmark is not very much different from what it is today," she said.

People in companies not incorporated in Singapore are not excluded from running for the office of the President, but they need to be able to prove the scale and complexity of the business and their experience in running the company, Dr Koh added.

The Constitutional Commission also recommended that there be a "reserved election" for candidates of a particular racial group if Singapore has not had a President from that group for five terms or about 30 years. The Commission said this is important as the President should reflect the nation's multiracialism. At the same time, it stressed that the eligibility criteria would not be lowered for anyone to qualify.

Associate Professor at the Singapore Management University, Eugene Tan said the recommendation is not an act of "tokenism", as some may have suggested. "I think the Commission took a lot of pains to address that. It emphasised that there is a need for minority candidates in the reserved election to still meet the stringent eligibility criteria but I think there was always a possibility that in a reserved election, voters might perceive it as a form of affirmative action to enable minority groups to have someone from their group to be an Elected President. But I think we should also bear in mind that the Commission was careful to keep it race-blind," he said.

Dr Koh agreed, saying that the eligibility criteria is not compromised, should there be a reserved election. "Whoever runs is still required to get a certificate of eligibility. That is enough of a safeguard. It shows we need not make special concessions for candidates of a certain race to contest and eventually make it to the chair," she said. Dr Koh and Prof Tan both made similar points on the President being chosen on merit when they were invited to air their views at the Constitutional Commission's series of public hearings earlier this year.

Sociologist at the National University of Singapore, Tan Ern Ser, said what is important for the Government to do going forward is to ensure people are educated about the role and functions of the office of the President. This was something the Commission also touched on in its report.

"I think when we do messaging, it's best to focus on what the Presidency is all about rather than what it's not about. Because then there is a focus where people can measure their own opinion against what the Presidency is meant to be," he said.

On top of having to explain the role of the President, Assoc Prof Eugene Tan said the Government has to explain what the changes are, and why they are necessary. But he voiced concern on the timeline for the changes to be implemented, if they are passed in Parliament.

"My concern is that whether the Government is likely to implement the changes in the next Presidential Election which is due by August 2017. It doesn't give them a long enough runway to engage to educate Singaporeans," he said.

Prof Tan said it would be good if the changes could be deferred to the next election in 2023. He said a significant change to the nation's system of governance should not be made in haste.