

Govt prepared to pay political price over changes to Elected Presidency: Chan Chun Sing

Lianne Chia

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It will be a “hard journey” to convince people about the need for changes to the Elected Presidency and the Government will pay a political price but it is prepared to, said Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office Chan Chun Sing on Friday (Sep 8).

Speaking at an Institute of Policy Studies forum on the Reserved Presidential Election, Mr Chan stressed that as a young nation, Singapore had to evolve its systems to adapt to its circumstances – not just to meet the “here and now” but also to anticipate and pre-empt challenges that may arise in the future.

Mr Chan asked those at the forum to raise their hands if they thought the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) had and will pay a political price over the recent changes to the Elected Presidency, and the debate surrounding it, including the hiatus-triggered model to ensure minority representation.

Noting the agreement of many in the hall, Mr Chan said: “Why, then, did we do this?”

“If we are all good politicians, we won’t and we shouldn’t do it,” he said. “No good politician would sacrifice his political capital for a problem that may arise in future generations. Most good politicians in the world would try to preserve their political capital for themselves to manage their current problems.”

“There are many conspiracy theories out there,” he added. “But for every conspiracy theory that is out there, I have a very good answer for you.

“If it has to do with an individual, then there are many other ways,” he said. “And if it is for political gain, then surely we are not achieving it as you have rightly pointed out.”

A POLITICIAN VERSUS A POLITICAL LEADER

To explain, Mr Chan related a story about a conversation with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, which he said taught him the difference between a politician and a political leader.

“We asked ourselves - PM, do we need to do this now? Because we had anticipated it would be a hard journey to convince people and we would pay the political price, at least in the short term,” said Mr Chan. “PM Lee’s answer will forever be etched in my mind, and that distinguished a politician from a political leader.

“He said ‘Yes, we are likely to pay a political price. Yes, we may not have a problem here and now, but what if we have a problem 20 or 30 years from now? Will the fourth, fifth or sixth generation of leaders have the liberty, and the luxury of time and space for them to put in place a system?’” said Mr Chan.

Mr Lee, he added, had taken it upon himself to put in place a system to pre-empt potential issues from arising in the future. “Not for himself, not for his political capital, but always thinking about what this country needs,” he said. “We are prepared to pay the political price, because

we think the future of our country is much more important than any political capital that we may have.”

Mr Chan stressed that it was a “very difficult decision” to make, but the Government owes it to the future generations to put in place systems to prevent issues.

“If the issues don’t arise in future, then we will be very happy and proud. And we have done our little bit for the future of Singapore to be better,” he said. “But we will not be able to face the future generations if we have not done what we can within our means to establish the foundations for them to be even more successful than us.”

IMPORTANT TO HAVE MECHANISM THAT ALLOWS CHANGE: JANIL PUTHUCHEARY

Another issue that was highlighted at the forum was how the race of prospective candidates can be defined, and what constitutes a Malay individual.

The upcoming Presidential Election, set for Sep 23, will be reserved for candidates from the Malay community.

Under the changes to the Elected Presidency, prospective candidates have to submit a Community Declaration form to the newly established Community Committee to certify that he or she belongs to the community which the election has been reserved for.

During an earlier session of the forum, the following hypothetical scenario was painted: A person who is born a Malay and is seen as such, later converts to Christianity. Will the committee determining the person’s eligibility turn him down on that basis?

In response, Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information Janil Puthuchery, who was part of the ministerial dialogue, stressed the importance of having a mechanism that “leaves open the possibility of change over time”.

He drew a comparison between the current set-up – having a combination of a self-declaration of one’s race followed by the acceptance of that declaration by a community – and with getting “absolute clarity” by putting the definitions of race into the Constitution.

“If we took the view that the Constitution needs to provide absolute clarity at this point in time ... it would mean then that there would be no opportunity to have a change without making a constitutional amendment,” he said. “We’d have to go back to Parliament every time - if there was a combination of inter-marriage that we had not foreseen, to pass a law and redefine if this person is Malay or Indian enough.”

Dr Puthuchery added that currently, while the definition of racial identity is left ambiguous, the process is clear. “So what you have is a mechanism for the process of selection of candidates to reflect what the community sentiment is,” he said. “The mechanism also leaves it open for someone in the same position to then be accepted at a later time when the sentiment has changed.”

He explained further: “The trade-off is that you get the particular individual, having that decision made about them ... if you don’t qualify as being Malay, it is seen as excluding that person.

“But that person is still eligible to stand in the open election. And that opportunity to always stand - that will always be a channel. You have the same chances in the open election as anyone else.”