

Singapore's next President: A look at potential contenders

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Amendments to the Constitution were passed on Nov 9, with Members of Parliament voting in favour of the Government's proposed changes to the Elected Presidency 77 to six.

Apart from tightening the eligibility criteria and strengthening the powers of the Council of Presidential Advisers, the Amendment Bill also put in place a "hiatus-triggered model" to ensure multi-racial representation in the Presidential office.

Under the new rules, the next Presidential Election – due Aug 26 next year – will be reserved for Malay candidates. This means Singaporeans will have their first Malay President since Mr Yusof Ishak died in office nearly 50 years ago.

After the amendments were passed, names of several potential frontrunners have surfaced. These are prominent figures in the Malay community, and are from both the public and private sectors.

Leading the list is current Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yaacob, a former unionist and an MP for Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC.

Former Minister and Speaker of Parliament Abdullah Tarmugi has also been tipped to be a potential candidate. Mr Abdullah – who was part of the nine-man Constitutional Commission that reviewed the elected presidency – reportedly said he has not given the idea of running much thought, and that friends have encouraged him to do so.

Current Ministers Yaacob Ibrahim and Masagos Zulkifli, and former MP Zainul Abidin Rasheed have also been identified as possible candidates.

Potential candidates from the private sector include Bank of Singapore CEO Bahren Shaari and Public Service Commission member Po'ad Mattar. So far, none of them have indicated any interest in contesting.

CANDIDATES FACE "UNIQUE CHALLENGE"

Political observers told *Channel NewsAsia* that candidates in this first ever reserved election face a very unique challenge.

"This person has to tread a very fine line between being the best of breed that that ethnic community can offer and yet also be that quintessential Singaporean that all voters feel they have an affinity for," said Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director (Research), Institute of Policy Studies.

This means candidates cannot limit themselves to speaking about issues concerning their own community, and must represent the values and ideals of a multicultural Singapore.

"We look at the example of Mr Yusof Ishak, when he was President. He was the managing editor of Utusan Melayu, a very Malay-rights newspaper. But when he became Yang-di-Pertuan Negara in 1959 and later as President in 1965, he represented Singapore. He spoke about multiculturalism, equality of rights," said Dr Norshahril Saat, Fellow, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute.

Singapore Management University Associate Professor Eugene Tan noted: "Candidates can set the tone as well by putting forth their vision or how they are going to promote and practise multiracialism through the office of the elected president."

Political observers also stressed that candidates must be aware of what their role as President constitutes, reinforcing what Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had said in Parliament.

Mr Lee recounted that in the 2011 Presidential Election, a candidate championed a S\$60 billion economic plan to create jobs and enterprise, while another proposed better recognition for national servicemen, and more help for the poor and unemployed.

These issues, according to Mr Lee, are the Government's responsibility.

"The purpose of having a President is not as a check and balance to Parliament. So I think one issue that the candidates should avoid is to act as if they can check the Government. They can't because they're largely symbolic even though they have custodial powers," said Dr Norshahril.

Instead, candidates should put forth issues of national unity, said Dr Koh.

"There's always a lot of goodwill that's conferred onto the person who occupies the office of President. So I think the candidates can talk a little bit about their lifetime interests, or things that they can use the office to develop so that it contributes to community building for Singaporeans at large," she added.

Observers said candidates should also highlight their track record, to show voters why he or she is the most qualified for the office.

While the role is largely ceremonial, the President still holds other important responsibilities, such as acting as the custodian of the nation's reserves, and representing Singapore internationally.

"ENSURE THAT EVERY VOTE COUNTS"

Critics have warned that a reserved election could lead voters to think that there is no need to be engaged and vote for the best minority candidate. This is why, according to observers like Associate Professor Tan and Dr Norshahril, there is a need for candidates to engage all Singaporeans in their campaign.

"It is important for them to have their say. Not just having their say, but also having an informed say. So it's not only being engaged so that they can determine who is better suited for the job, who would engender greater confidence and trust amongst the voters," said Associate Professor Tan.

Dr Norshahril noted: "You must ensure that every vote counts. You must ensure that citizens feel that their vote counts. Candidates must come out very strongly and tell voters that they're voting for the future of Singapore."