

# **When will Singapore have a non-Chinese prime minister? It's up to Singaporeans, says Janil Puthucheary**

*Chew Hui Min*

*Channel News Asia, 25 January 2021*

It will ultimately be up to the people of Singapore to decide whether the country is ready for a non-Chinese prime minister, said Senior Minister of State (SMS) Janil Puthucheary on Monday (Jan 25).

Dr Puthucheary, who is SMS for Health and for Communications and Information, was answering questions from the audience at a panel discussion on Politics in Singapore 2030 organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

On the panel with him at the Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021 themed "Reset" were Aljunied GRC Member of Parliament Gerald Giam from the Workers' Party (WP), and Non-Constituency MP Hazel Poa from the Progress Singapore Party (PSP).

The hybrid online and in-person session held at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre on Monday afternoon was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, who is deputy director of research at IPS.

"It will be up to the people of Singapore to decide ultimately, about this matter," said Dr Puthucheary, who is from the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and heads the party's youth wing.

"I do hope that our racial harmony progresses to the point where when people talk about a non-Chinese prime minister, it's not about an icon of resetting or an icon of reimagining ... but on the basis of that person's ability to do the job.

"And that will be for Singaporeans to decide."

The issue has been brought up multiple times in recent years, and Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, the frontrunner to be Singapore's next PM, had said in 2019 that the older generation of Singaporeans is not ready for a leader from a minority race.

"Race continues to matter ... Surveys done by IPS themselves suggests that that is so. I think I would fully subscribe to the idea that I wish it were not so," said Dr Puthucheary.

## **PAP IS NOT READY FOR NON-CHINESE PM: HAZEL POA**

PSP's Ms Poa disagreed, saying that she thinks Singapore is ready for a non-Chinese prime minister.

"The only reason we are not ready is the PAP is not ready," she said.

Mr Giam agreed that Singaporeans are open to the idea, saying that he has not come across views that they are not ready for someone who is "capable, honest and able to be a good leader" to assume the role of prime minister.

He pointed out that in Singapore's parliamentary system, the PM is not directly elected by the people, but selected by the party.

WP chose Mr Pritam Singh as its secretary-general in 2018, and it fielded three non-Chinese and two Chinese candidates "who don't speak Chinese very well" in Aljunied GRC in this year's election, he said.

Besides Mr Giam, the Aljunied GRC MPs are Mr Singh, WP chair Sylvia Lim, Mr Faisal Manap and Mr Leon Perera.

"It is really the decisions of the individual parties ... whether they feel that in their electoral calculations ... that they want to field a non-Chinese as their party leader," said Mr Giam, the policy research team head of WP.

"I think we've had a relative credible degree of electoral success with our current party leader who is not a Chinese."

#### WILL MORE PARTIES LEAD TO DIVISIVENESS?

The three panellists also debated the pros and cons of a multi-party system in Singapore, following questions from the audience.

Mr Tan Keng Soon, chairman of the Tan Ean Kiam Foundation, asked if more opposition in the political system might reduce the effectiveness of the Government. Ms Janice Koh, an actress and former Nominated MP, asked whether a multi-party system in Singapore could result in more division in society, and how any negative effects could be mitigated.

Dr Puthuchery said that how Singapore's political system turns out in the future is also up to the people.

"Whether it's a multi-party, a two-party, dominant and a less dominant, an alternating revolving door - and we've had examples of this all around the world - that outcome will be decided by our people," he said.

"I think that is ... like democracy, the least worst possible way of doing it."

Mr Giam said that each political party and each political candidate has to make a conscious decision to act responsibly and act in the interest of the country.

"I don't think just having multiple parties is automatically going to make sure that everything balances out. There will be good parties, there will be bad parties. The ultimate judge of this will be the people of Singapore."

Ms Poa, a PSP central executive council member, said that she did not see more divisiveness in Parliament even with more representation from different parties.

"I think we should keep an open mind and evolve our own model," she added.

"When we are faced with a climate where the choices are not so clear, the way forward is uncertain, then it is too risky to continue to rely on a one-party system ... it would always make sense to have a backup plan."