

## **Why no women on the Presidential scene? AWARE asks Constitutional Commission**

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Women's rights group AWARE took issue with the glaring lack of women on the Presidential scene as public hearings held by the Constitutional Commission on the Elected Presidency got underway on Monday (Apr 18).

AWARE kicked off its presentation with an image captioned "All the President's men", showing current President Tony Tan Keng Yam surrounded by the six-member Council of Presidential Advisers – all of which are men.

Executive director of AWARE, Ms Corinna Lim, pointed out that this was the case despite there being "many highly qualified women (and) female talent at the highest levels".

### **Make presidency more representative of society: AWARE**

Ms Lim criticised the all-male CPA and the Presidential Elections Committee (PEC), saying these groups are not representative of Singaporean society. She noted that while the Presidency is occupied by one person, the CPA and PEC are heavily involved in the office as well.

"This is where you really can make sure that (the Presidency is more) representative," she suggested, highlighting that members of the CPA and PEC are appointed, not elected.

AWARE also called for the eligibility criteria to be relaxed, as currently, the "gate is too narrow" and unable to capture a range of candidates who could be more representative of society, including more women.

Professor Chan Heng Chee, the only woman on the nine-member Commission, said she welcomed discussion on gender diversity in Presidential Elections, but questioned whether relaxing the eligibility criteria, such as on paid-up capital, would meet the objective of attracting more women to run for President.

Prof Chan said many women already hold senior positions and serve as chairmen and chief executive officers in companies with paid-up capital of more than S\$100 million - which is the current criteria.

Ms Lim also called for a "public education" about the office of the President, noting the general public's lack of interest or understanding of "the complex office".

### **"We have not come to that multiracial nirvana"**

Like those that spoke before him, Senior Research Fellow with the Institute of Policy Studies, Dr Mathew Mathews brought up the point of minority representation in the Elected Presidency.

Dr Mathews said that while Singapore has come a long way, "we have not come to that multiracial nirvana that some hope we are in".

Dr Mathews pointed to a survey conducted by IPS of some 2,000 Chinese respondents showing about 18 per cent were not comfortable with an Indian or Malay employer, compared to just seven per cent who were not comfortable with an Indian or Malay colleague.

Our society is not yet “completely race-blind”, he said, highlighting the need to safeguard minority representation in the EP, to ensure minorities feel they have a fair chance of being elected and are equally represented.

To address this, Dr Mathews suggested the Republic hold a “minority election” if Singapore has not had a minority President for a substantial period of time, such as for four of five consecutive terms (24 to 30 years).

The minority presidential hopeful would still have to meet the eligibility criteria, he added.

As to whether a President elected in this way would have “less of a mandate” from the people, Dr Mathews said: “I do think that there is always an initial feeling of tokenism ... You can call the person a 'token' because of his connection with the powers that be.”

He raised the example of former President S R Nathan. “There was no election to begin with. I don’t think he felt that he was any less qualified. People can go beyond that ... in terms of how they conduct their affairs. If you do it with dignity (and you are) distinguished, that builds credibility,” Dr Mathews said.

### **Introduce an element of flexibility: academic**

Academic Loke Hoe Yong suggested that the post of Vice President be introduced, and that the VP hopeful run on a joint ticket with a presidential candidate. If the pair wins, the VP would “double up” as a Speaker of Parliament, or alternatively, as Chairman of the CPA, he said.

One of the two must be a member of a minority community, he stated. This would “introduce an element of flexibility to the system”, Mr Loke told the Commission. “We want to safeguard minority representation, but not limit the office of the President to one community,” Mr Loke said.

The public hearings on proposed changes to the Elected Presidency will continue on Friday, when The Eurasian Association and four individuals are expected to take questions from the Commission. The hearings, scheduled for Apr 22, 26 and May 6, are open to the public, and will take place at the Supreme Court auditorium.