

Constitutional Commission Hearing on the Elected Presidency: IPS Researchers' Reflections

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Earlier this year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong appointed a Constitutional Commission to study potential changes to the Elected Presidency (EP) system. He identified three areas to be reviewed: the qualifying criteria for candidates, whether the views of the Council of Presidential Advisors (CPA) should be given greater weight, and how to ensure that minorities have better a chance of being elected.

IPS researchers Dr Mathew Mathews, Dr Gillian Koh, and Tan Min-Wei, were among the 19 groups and individuals who presented their recommendations to the commission during four sessions, which were open to the public.



IPS Senior Research Fellow Mathew Mathews

Dr Mathews, who heads the Society and Identity Research cluster at IPS, spoke on 18 April. He expressed his support for the safeguarding of minority representation in the elected presidency. Citing previous research conducted at the Institute, the Senior Research Fellow said that inter-racial acceptability might not extend to all domains in people's lives. Elsewhere, social psychological research also suggests that a portion of voters tend to feel a greater affinity to someone who is racially similar to themselves. He recommended that when a stipulated number of terms are met, the next presidential election should be identified as a potential minorities election (see [here](#) for his full proposal).



IPS Deputy Director (Research) Gillian Koh

IPS Deputy Director (Research) Dr Gillian Koh and Research Assistant Tan Min-Wei made their representations on 26 April. Dr Koh leads the work of IPS' Politics and Governance cluster, which Mr Tan is a member of. They had previously [offered suggestions on how to enhance the EP system](#).

In their proposal to the Constitutional Commission, they argued that the qualifying criteria of presidential candidates should be more stringent. The current criteria does not adequately require potential candidates from the private sector to demonstrate that they have performed senior executive roles in their organisations and were actively involved in day-to-day management and strategic decision-making processes. They recommended that a formula be devised to establish the qualifying size of the organisation potential candidates should have managed in the private sector. Also, they recommended specifying a maximum “look-

back” period to ensure that the potential candidates’ experience and skills were up-to-date and finally, that the minimum length of experience for all the criteria for eligibility be raised from three to five years.

On the issue of ethnicity, they took a different position from Dr Mathews. They maintained that there was a need to privilege the merit-based rationale for refining the eligibility criteria for candidates over an ethnic one. They said that there would be real concerns as to whether the eventual office-holder would have the full legitimacy and gravitas required if he or she took the post through a system with an “ethnic-based pre-qualification”. They also said that the electoral mandate of the President should not be diluted by any reforms to give more power to the CPA. See [here](#) for full their proposal.

Asked to comment on their proposals and meeting with the Commission, the researchers gave the following responses.



IPS Research Assistant Tan Min-Wei

Q: What ideas inspired and motivated you in crafting your proposal to the commission?

Dr Mathews: The commission was tasked to look at the issue of minority representation in the Elected Presidency. Considering that the Presidency is going to be heavily contested today compared to when it was first proposed in the 1990s, I had my concerns as to whether minorities would in fact be elected. It is also very obvious that since President Yusof Ishak, we have not had a President from a Malay ethnic background. We take it for granted that our

multiracial character will be represented in the ethnic backgrounds of the elected President. This was the case in the earlier years when we saw this happen as a matter of fact — President Yusof Ishak was a Malay. He was followed by President Benjamin Sheares, a Eurasian, then President Devan Nair, an Indian, and finally President Wee Kim Wee, a Chinese.

While I do believe that in the long-run, one's race will not pose an advantage or disadvantage in an election, I find it hard to say that this is definitely not the case now. As such, I was motivated by the fact that we need safeguards in the system to ensure that from time to time, minorities would be elected.

Dr Koh and Mr Tan: The Politics and Governance cluster has a natural interest in one of the key political institutions of Singapore — the Elected Presidency, especially since it is such a new and unique one. At the presidential election of August 2011, our researchers noted how the candidates and the public misperceived the role of the Elected President. We conducted a survey on the public's understanding of it after the election. Since then, we proposed reforms such as the one on the election system. So, we were prepared to craft a submission regarding other areas of the Elected Presidency but kept the submission tightly focused on the terms of reference of the review.

To that end, we simply wanted to refine the qualification criteria to ensure their original intent was preserved and that the controversies from previous processes of qualification could be avoided while the criteria is updated. We also tried every which way to consider how to qualify the system by ethnicity. However, even the most light-touch methods held the risk of hardening the notion that there was some ethnic group that needs a handicap for any of its members to take the post. We felt that no community should be labelled as any less than the others and that such a system would be too dismissive of the prospect that all our communities will have singular talents who will qualify for the post.

Q: What did you find valuable about the experience of presenting your recommendations at one of the public hearings, for you personally and for members of the public?

Dr Mathews: For the public I believe the recommendations I put forward provides them a middle path in the considerations to ensure minority representation from time to time and meritocracy.

For instance, some of the proposals sought to bring about minority representation by either reducing the requirements or [having minorities as part of a GRC type system](#). On the other hand there were those who were opposed to such forced methods to ensure minority representation as this would be regarded as tokenistic. The public was able to have one other proposal, which called for the preservation of current methods in elected the presidency with the exception of putting in safeguards in the case that there was a protracted period of time without a president from a particular racial group.

It was a valuable experience for me since it was a chance to put to some use in an important public deliberation process, some of the research the Society and Identity cluster at IPS has been doing. That is important for researchers since otherwise you wonder why you bother to work hard in constantly researching issues.

Dr Koh and Mr Tan: We were struck by the range of views that the Commission was willing to explore, which spanned the conservative to the radical. All representors and their ideas were treated with respect and the Commission members were very wise and incisive in their questions and comments. The tone they took convinced us they were willing to weigh up the merits of every argument. They also took the time to explain the role of the Elected President as it is and asked representors how their ideas would gel with that. We learnt a lot from the Commission. We also noticed that a large part of all the hearings focused on the challenge of ensuring minority representation.

Q: What to you are three words or phrases that should ideally be identified with the office of the Elected President in Singapore?

Dr Mathews:

- 1) Publicly recognised stature
- 2) Multiracialism
- 3) Integrity and Competence

Dr Koh and Mr Tan: In the context of the system as it is today —

- 1) Popular mandate
- 2) Reactive executive powers
- 3) Political but non-partisan

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