

More Singaporeans open to non-Chinese PM, President since 2016, survey shows

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SINGAPORE, April 2 — A survey has found that since 2016, Singaporeans have grown more open to the idea of a non-Chinese Prime Minister or President.

A greater majority of the respondents of the CNA-IPS Survey on Race Relations are now accepting of Singaporean Malays (69.6 per cent) or Indians (70.5 per cent) as the Prime Minister, up from 60.8 per cent and 64.3 per cent in 2016 when a similar survey was done.

The proportions are higher when it comes to the role of president, with about 82 per cent of respondents saying they are accepting of either Singaporean Malays or Indians as the President, up from 65.5 per cent and 70.6 per cent respectively in 2016.

The report said this was possibly attributable to the fact that Singapore has had a Malay person as president since 2017, President Halimah Yacob.

Apart from President Halimah, Singapore has had four other non-Chinese President since the country's independence — SR Nathan (1999 to 2011), Devan Nair (1981 to 1985), Dr Benjamin Sheares (1971 to 1981) and Yusof Ishak (1965 to 1970).

The percentage of respondents indicating that they preferred a Singaporean Chinese to be President or Prime Minister was above 90 per cent, similar to figures from 2016.

Overall, the findings showed that there is still some in-group preference for these roles, and respondents do not welcome new citizens of any origin in these positions — fewer than 10 per cent of the respondents would be comfortable with a new citizen as President or Prime Minister.

The survey was conducted by news outlet CNA and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), a local think tank. It involved 2,007 Singapore citizens and permanent residents representative of Singapore's resident population.

They were surveyed between November last year and January this year.

The study gathered responses on race relations here, with topics ranging from perceptions of race-based policies to the level of racism across different racial groups.

The responses formed the basis of a two-part documentary that was aired on CNA on Thursday (March 31) and Friday.

In a paper based on the findings, the IPS researchers — Dr Mathew Mathews, Dr Teo Kay Key and Samantha Nah — noted that “much has been made of the finding in the 2016 wave of the survey that Singaporeans were generally not as comfortable with a non-Chinese Prime Minister”.

The researchers said: “Given that our (latest) results already show increasing acceptance of minorities becoming President and Prime Minister, perhaps the ruling party can work towards

naming a minority candidate as Prime Minister in the near future, even if segments of the population are still not ready for a minority in such a political role.”

They added: “The rationale for this would be that this action could perhaps break barriers and further dismantle prejudices. Of course, decisions on this matter have to be carefully considered. While racial representation at the political level is crucial, it is important that any move should preserve meritocracy. It should therefore not lead to a minority Prime Minister being viewed as a token and subsequently not accorded the high level of support needed for his or her leadership.”

The findings also found that Chinese people living in private property were less accepting of minority races as Prime Minister compared to the rest of the socioeconomic groups.

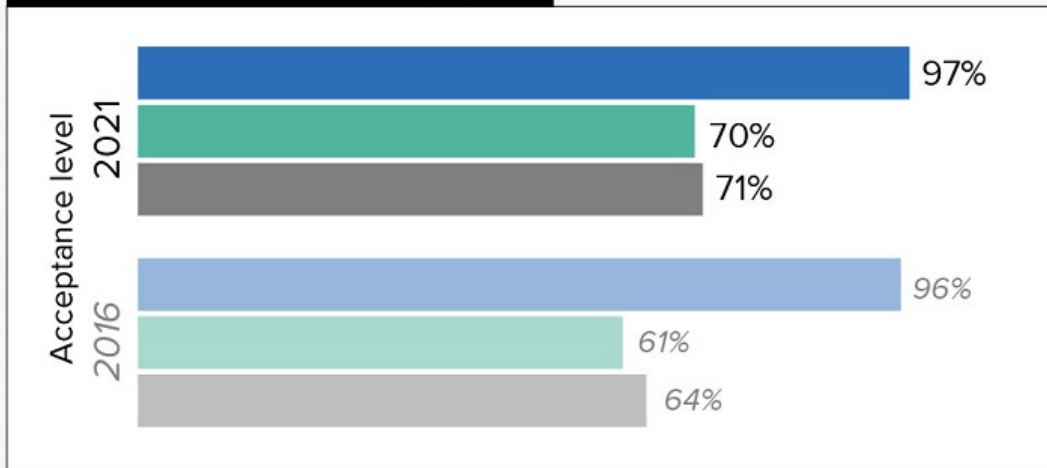
While more than 70 per cent of Chinese respondents living in public housing said that Singaporean Malays and Indians being Prime Minister of Singapore was acceptable, only about 40 per cent of private property dwellers felt the same.

The researchers said that this particular finding was “interesting” given that private housing is exempted from ethnic quotas on public housing which ensures a balanced ethnic mix in neighbourhoods.

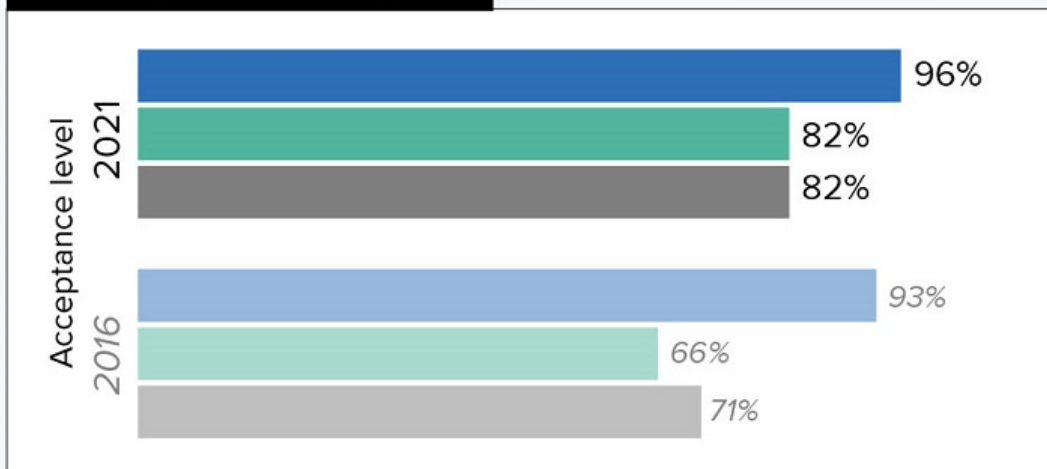
“While further studies are likely needed to ascertain the connection, it raises the issues as to whether living environment or socioeconomic backgrounds could impact citizens’ attitudes towards other races in society,” they said.

Racial preferences for prime minister and president of S'pore

To be the prime minister of Singapore



To be the president of Singapore



■ Singaporean Chinese
 ■ Singaporean Malay
 ■ Singaporean Indian

Source: CNA & IPS

Preference for leader from own race

The survey findings also found that Chinese, Malay and Indian respondents showed the highest preference for someone of their own race as Prime Minister or President.

For example, 98.9 per cent of Chinese respondents said they would accept a Chinese Prime Minister, but only 63.9 per cent would accept a Malay one, and 65.8 per cent an Indian one.

In the case of Malay respondents, 92.6 per cent said they would accept a Prime Minister of the same race, but 87.5 per cent would be comfortable with a Chinese one and 80.4 per cent with an Indian one.

Among Indian respondents, 91.9 per cent said they would accept a Singaporean Indian in the roles, 80.8 per cent would accept Malays and 90.3 per cent would accept Singaporean Chinese.

The trend across all three racial groups was similar when it came to picking a President.

Nevertheless, among the three racial groups, Chinese respondents saw the biggest jump in being more open to both a Prime Minister and President of another race as compared to 2016.

For example, 79.4 per cent of Chinese respondents said they were open to a Malay President, up from 58.8 per cent in 2016.

They were also more accepting of an Indian president, with 79.9 per cent indicating so, up from 67.6 per cent in 2016.

They were similarly more open to having a minority Prime Minister, with 63.9 per cent saying they accepted a Malay candidate, up from 53.3 per cent in 2016.

Likewise, 65.8 per cent of Chinese respondents said they would accept an Indian Prime Minister, up from 59.5 per cent in 2016.

Conversely, respondents across all race groups were not open to having a new citizen as their President or Prime Minister.

Fewer than 10 per cent of respondents said they were accepting of new citizens in those top positions, similar to the proportion that said so in 2016. — TODAY