

## **S'pore public ready for non-Chinese PM: PSP's Hazel Poa & WP's Gerald Giam**

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*Giam also highlighted that Prime Minister was not directly elected by the people.*

Singapore is "already ready" for a non-Chinese prime minister, Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) Hazel Poa said on Jan. 25, 2021, during a panel, "Politics in Singapore 2030", at the 2021 edition of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) annual forum, Singapore Perspectives.

However, the only reason why the country is not ready is because the ruling People's Action Party is not ready, she added.

Poa was responding to a question by the moderator, Gillian Koh, Deputy Director (Research) and Senior Research Fellow at IPS, on to whom the issue of the Prime Minister's race mattered.

Other panellists included Workers' Party Member of Parliament (MP) Gerald Giam and Senior Minister of State (SMS) for the Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry for Communications and Information (MCI) Janil Puthuchery, from the People's Action Party (PAP).

### **WP's Gerald Giam: The PM in Singapore is not elected directly by the people**

Poa's view was echoed by Giam, who said he drew on his experience of conversations with various Singaporeans, including those who were Chinese.

Giam said he did not see any view expressed suggesting that they are not ready for someone who is "capable, honest and able to lead the country".

Giam elaborated how he came to this view:

"The prime minister is not directly elected by the people... like how the president is elected directly by the people. The prime minister is elected or selected by his or her own party. So, it is really the decisions of the individual parties, whether they feel that in their electoral calculations, in their internal political calculations, they want to field a non-Chinese as the party leader, as the secretary-general."

### **The WP has had electoral success with non-Chinese candidates**

Giam highlighted that the WP had elected Pritam Singh, a non-Chinese as the party's secretary-general, and that his election to the position is not the first time a non-Chinese has led the party as well.

Prior to Low Thia Kiang, the late J.B. Jeyaretnam had served as the party's leader for 30 years, from 1971 to 2001.

In pointing out that the WP has had a relatively "credible degree" of electoral success with the current party leader, Giam added that the slate of WP candidates for Aljunied Group Member Constituency (GRC) has three non-Chinese members.

Giam said:

"And I would add the two other Chinese are Peranakan and don't speak Chinese very well. So, if race and language were such an important factor for such an important constituency, we would have made sure that we fielded an all-Chinese slate or at least four Chinese in the slate. But we made our calculations that this was the suitable slate of candidates that would be able to serve the residents of Aljunied well and therefore we chose that slate of candidates, regardless of race."

### **PAP's Janil Puthuchery: "Race continues to matter"**

In response, Janil replied to Koh that "race continues to matter" and that such a sentiment is suggested in IPS surveys, even though he "wished that it were not so".

When Koh then asked if this would still be the case in a decade, Janil answered:

"You know, I think it would be hard to predict. I don't know that if you asked the founding generation in 1965, whether by the time you got to 2021, whether race would matter more or matter less. I think 10 years is a short time, by some timeframes."

This prompted Koh's next question on what is being done to scrap such a sentiment.

Janil replied that many things were being done, from discourse within the education system, to research on the issue with IPS, to work with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as OnePeople.sg.

The minister added that the objective of such initiatives was to understand and intervene on what is essentially "a personal bias, a personal stereotype", which people do not necessarily reveal or express outwardly, but has aggregate effects across the population.

Janil said:

"It will be up to the people of Singapore to decide, ultimately, about this matter. And I do hope that our racial harmony progresses, to the point where when people talk about a non-Chinese prime minister, it's not an icon of re-setting or icon of reimagining... but on the basis of that person's ability to do the job."