

## **Notmypresident: Singaporeans vent over voterless election**

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On the humid afternoon of Saturday, Sept. 16, several hundred Singaporeans in black T-shirts descended on a public park to demonstrate their unhappiness about the nation's first reserved presidential election.

The protest was organized by activist Gilbert Goh, who called for all citizens to show their displeasure. "It's time to unleash that frustration by showing up with like-minded Singaporeans together as one voice," he posted on Facebook.

The unhappiness arose when Singapore's election department announced this month that Halimah Yacob, a former speaker of parliament, was the sole eligible candidate who qualified for the presidency.

The Singapore government made a significant amendment to the constitution this year regarding presidential elections, reserving the position for a particular ethnic group if it had been unrepresented in the position for five continuous terms.

Presidents have been elected to six-year terms since 1991, and prior to that were appointed by parliament. Singapore has a dominant ethnic Chinese population with Malay, Indian and Eurasian minorities. Ensuring equal opportunities and proper representation for all ethnicities have been keystones in establishing Singaporean national identity.

Because of the new law, on this occasion only Malays were eligible to apply for the certificate of eligibility as a presidential candidate.

As she was declared to be the only eligible candidate, Singaporeans did not have to vote for their new president, whose duties include promoting good bilateral relations and safeguarding the national coffers.

Halimah's presidency marks a milestone in Singapore's history. She is not only the first woman president, but also Singapore's first Malay president in over 40 years.

However, the realization that voter participation would not be required led to much unhappiness among Singaporeans and sparked a Twitter storm that included the hashtag #notmypresident. Some said fundamental national principles had been trampled.

"In a country whose core values are meritocracy, regardless of race, language or religion, this stinks of hypocrisy," Darren Teo tweeted.

"It would have been a significant event for [Singapore] to elect her first female president, but now the word 'elected' has lost its meaning," tweeted Huiwen Zheng.

Observers said the critical undertow was evidence of greater political awareness and sensitivity to race relations. Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies said the reactions revealed a "division of opinion on how best Singapore's defining ideals of multiracialism, meritocracy and prudent, honest governance should be balanced."

"Those who are unhappy would have preferred the president receive an electoral mandate," she said.

"Given that this is Singapore's first reserved election, it is a test of citizens' receptivity towards institutionalized means of ensuring minority representation," said Woo Jun Jie, an associate professor at Nanyang Technological University.

Eugene Tan, an associate professor of law at Singapore Management University, noted signs of "a more engaged citizenry who are less enthused by the government's views of race relations."

"Singapore is not post-racial yet, but the idea that we will set aside multiracialism and meritocracy when it comes to voting is not well-received," he said.