

IPS Forum on the Reforms to the Elected Presidency System

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The IPS Forum on the Reforms to the Elected Presidency System (EP) was held on 21 October from 2.00pm to 5.30pm at the Padang Room, Raffles City Convention Centre. The forum was attended by 223 people including IPS staff and open for media coverage.

Welcome Remarks by Dr Gillian Koh

Dr Gillian Koh, IPS Deputy Director (Research), opened the forum by inviting the audience to consider three questions. First, what is so important about the EP? Second, why reform it now? Third, what are the objectives of the forum?

On the question of the importance of the EP, Dr Koh highlighted the three roles of the President today — the ceremonial and symbolic role where representation of the country's multiracialism is a critical function; the custodial role with veto powers over the country's past financial reserves and key public and legal service appointments; and the protective functions over internal security, ethnic harmony and corruption.

On the importance of these roles, Dr Koh said that there are two questions that have often been posed: Is the EP the result of just one man's paranoia? How effective and powerful is the President, given that there is a check on the President by the Council of Presidential Advisers (CPA)? She recounted how former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was indeed concerned that in a freak election, the government arising from it could squander the reserves that it had not built up, and that only another elected authority could block such a possibility. She highlighted that in the subsequent government White Papers, the idea of the CPA was developed to "moderate" the President's powers and prevent him or her from making "hasty or arbitrary decisions". The CPA was therefore given the authority to disagree with the President's exercise of veto power, which would then send a proposed Supply Bill or list of proposed appointees back to the duly-elected Parliament, which could override the veto with a two-thirds majority. The system does eventually return the decision-making process back to Parliament.

On the second question — on reforming the EP, Dr Koh said that some asked if the government had been driven by political considerations, given that the next Presidential election will be held by August 2017. She recounted the process of public consultation that tapped the views of experts and ordinary citizens, from which the Constitutional Commission that was appointed to review suggestions drew its recommendations. She said that the government then accepted the broad recommendations by the Commission, the result of a IPS Forum on the Reforms to the Elected Presidency System, Debbie Soon & Tan Min-Wei, October 2016

six-month consultation process from mid-February to mid-September 2016. In its recommendations, the Commission demonstrated wisdom in balancing the tensions between upholding meritocracy and multiracialism, and between the authority of the elected President and that of the non-elected CPA, she said.

On the third question — on the objectives of the forum — she said that the forum would allow participants to think afresh about the specific proposals, before these are debated in Parliament in early November. A second objective was to sharpen participants' instincts about Singapore's national interests. In a changing world, the past reserves are a strategic asset, and in the same way, the President who protects them is a strategic asset. The third objective was for participants to engage in the democratic process of discussing important national issues. Together, these ensure that Singapore can exercise a strategic choice in how it wishes to respond to various geopolitical challenges, rather than be held hostage by them. So the EP is not just one man's paranoia, but also Singaporeans' interest to "outwit, outlast and outplay" any threats to the country's interests as its forefathers did in their time.

Session One: The Proposed Reforms



Professor Eugene Tan (centre) takes a question from the floor while chairing a panel consisting of (from left to right) Mr Benett Theseira, Professor Hsieh Tsun-Yan, Dr Jaclyn Neo, and Mr David Black.

The first session examined the different aspects of the proposed reforms to the EP. The chairperson, Associate Professor (Assoc. Prof.) Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University's School of Law, said that Singapore's political and constitutional system had, since Independence, been engineered to meet the diverse needs of Singaporeans and therefore evolved away from the Westminster template. From 1984 to 1991, Singapore saw the introduction of Non-Constituency Members of Parliament, Group Representation Constituencies, Nominated Members of Parliament and the EP. Many of these schemes were

put in place before the reins were handed over from the first to second Prime Ministers. Assoc. Prof. Tan said that the current re-examination of the EP is the most significant renovation of it since then, and is also taking place on the threshold of another leadership transition. It comes on the back of a combative 2011 Presidential Election, which saw conflicting visions of the elected President's role, from candidates and voters alike. He invited the panel of speakers to discuss the proposed changes.

Professor Hsieh Tsun-Yan, Chairman of the Linhart Group, discussed the review of eligibility criteria especially in relation to Article 19(2)(g)(iii) of the Constitution. The new proposed eligibility criteria would see the most senior executive of a company with at least an average of S\$500 million in shareholder equity for three consecutive financial years make the cut. In Prof. Hsieh's view, the more critical issue is not the size of the company a candidate has managed but whether a candidate has the qualitative leadership traits to make difficult decisions on behalf of the country in the volatile, uncertain, confusing and ambiguous (VUCA) world we face today.

In Prof. Hsieh's experience observing leaders in top companies, the eligibility criteria is being used as a proxy measure for certain leadership qualities that are needed — sound judgement; the systems view to anticipate the second-order impact or dynamic interactions that emerge from decisions; the courage to go against the tide for the right reasons; boldness to display calmness in crisis; presence and stature; and also the compassion to empathise with how stakeholders will be affected by those decisions. In many companies that Prof. Hsieh has dealt with, there were many high-performing candidates who lacked these key qualities and were thus not ready to assume the top posts.

Benett Theseira, President of the Eurasian Association Singapore, commented on the term of reference relating to safeguarding minority representation in the presidency. The EP did serve an important symbolic role of a multiracial Singapore nationally and abroad, he said. At home, it should reflect how race is no hindrance to reaching the highest position in the country; and abroad, it should reflect how Singapore is a harmonious multiracial country.

However, achieving multiracial representation with the EP is not without its difficulties, he said. Recent survey findings suggest that Singaporeans are not yet race-blind, especially when it comes to personal relationships and political leadership. The ratio of Eurasians to Chinese is one to every 200 persons, and even with the proposed hiatus-triggered reserved election of minorities every five terms, it would be a long wait for minorities to become President — nearly the time span of a generation.

In the review process, the Eurasian Association explored many ideas about how the EP could be reformed. One view was that the country might need to “go back to go forward” — scrap the election system as it might not be the best mechanism for the most meritocratic person to get the job, as the election makes it more of a popularity contest. The Association considered how the raising of the eligibility criteria, if done excessively, might shrink the pool of potential candidates, especially from minority communities. It thus recommended more holistic eligibility criteria in assessing the suitability of candidates if the election system were to be scraped, with qualities beyond the financial stipulations, to identify people who would be Presidents that Singaporeans would be proud of. He said the Association is pleased with some of the proposals of the Commission, but is also concerned that Eurasians would be grouped together

with Indians under the “Others” category. Given that Indians outnumber Eurasians 20 to one, it could mean an even longer wait before there is a Eurasian President.

Assistant Professor (Asst. Prof.) Jaclyn Neo of the NUS Faculty of Law addressed the third term of reference in the review of the EP, which had to do with the role of the CPA. The new framework would include eight nominees — up from the original six, where the President and the Prime Minister would each propose an additional nominee, up from the original two. The Chief Justice and the Chairman of the Public Service Commission would continue to nominate one person each to the CPA. In addition, the President would continue to select one member of the CPA to be its Chairman, who would have the casting vote in the event of a tie.

Furthermore, the current framework obliges the elected President to consult the CPA only on certain matters. If the CPA does not agree with the President’s decision to withhold assent on these matters, Parliament can override the President’s decision by a two-thirds majority. The proposed framework imposes a general obligation on the President to consult the CPA on all matters, with some exceptions that include discretionary powers concerning investigations of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, restraining orders with the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and instances of preventative detention, as well as the President’s traditional powers.

In the proposed changes, the CPA would also play an additional role in the entrenchment or amendment provisions to the Constitution in relation to Article 5A on provisions that establish the EP system, and Article 5B on provisions relating to the President’s office and discretionary powers. Asst. Prof. Neo said that there are three ways in which constitutional amendments relating to the office of the President and certain discretionary powers of the President can be tabled in Parliament. A Bill can be tabled in Parliament if: (1) the President concurs with its introduction; (2) a majority of votes through a national referendum are secured; or (3) there is concurrence from the CPA even if the President withholds assent, provided the President’s grounds for refusal is published in the Gazette.

The reforms also aim to improve the CPA’s accountability in the areas of procedure, content and publication. On procedure, a quorum of five out of eight members of the CPA is required under the new framework for meetings, where decisions have to be made by the majority of members present. On content, recommendations provided by the CPA must include the grounds of decision-making, and the tally of votes (unanimous or otherwise). On publication, the CPA’s recommendations will be presented by the Speaker of Parliament in the case of Supply Bills, or the President could provide the CPA’s recommendations to the Prime Minister or the Chairman of the Fifth Schedule entity, where relevant.

Asst. Prof. Neo also highlighted the new criteria for selecting members of the CPA; these are expanded to state that they should be persons of integrity, good character and reputation, with expertise and experience relevant to the CPA’s functions. These criteria are not hard rules but “soft precepts” to guide the judgement of nominating parties, as there is discretion in that choice.

Asst. Prof. Neo said that the changes solidify the role of the CPA as part of a system of checks and balances involving the EP. The new framework is not just neater but reflects the CPA’s important advisory role and expertise that can be lent to the President. In addition, the general obligation to consult the CPA can have the effect of making the President’s decision-making

process more deliberative. The inclusion of the CPA in the entrenchment framework can cause some concern, due to the fact that it is not democratically elected, but is as intended, an independently nominated body. There is thus a need to consider how this can be conceptually justified. It is also necessary to guard against the possibility that the inclusion of the CPA in the entrenchment framework will lead to the politicisation of the CPA. In the debates on the EP in 1990, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said that the government was creating a “*de facto* senate”. From the perspective of constitutional law, Asst. Prof. Neo said it was interesting to conceptualise the CPA as a form of a senate. If this is indeed the case, she invited the audience to think about how to further establish the link between the CPA and Parliament as well between it and the people, given its authority.

David Black, Owner and Managing Director of Blackbox Research Pte Ltd, shared insights about how Singaporeans view the reform of the EP based on data from his company’s monthly omnibus survey. He shared that less than half the respondents in his monthly surveys said they were tracking the EP reforms issue, and this spiked only after the Constitutional Commission released its report, where 63% of respondents said they were tracking it. There were gender differences and the younger respondents were the least engaged segment. Compared with other public policy issues, the EP, he said, is “not a high heat topic” for most Singaporeans.

Furthermore, he felt that Singaporeans had difficulties getting their heads around the system and proposed reforms. In his October 2016 survey, 37% of respondents polled said they were still not following the issue, about 20% of respondents said they were “unsure” on most of the agree/disagree items in the survey, whereas this figure usually stands at the 5% range for other public policy topics. Also, one in three respondents said that the idea of reserved elections would help social cohesion yet undermine meritocracy.

The survey series polled respondents on whether they thought the reforms and the roles of the President were necessary to improve them. The top five areas that respondents felt changes are necessary, based on the average scores from the June to September 2016 polls, were: the powers to protect Singapore’s reserves (95%); the community contribution of candidates (88%); private sector eligibility (76%); opportunities for a woman to be President (75%); and opportunities for minority representation (71%). The survey findings suggest that the public is more interested in the President’s role of safeguarding Singapore’s reserves than anything else.

In addition, Singaporeans overwhelmingly support an elected President with clear powers, where 82% assented to the notion that the President elected by Singaporeans should exercise the power to block the government’s proposed spending of the country’s national reserves, and 80% were in favour of the notion that the President elected by Singaporeans should exercise the power to block the government’s nominees for top positions within the public and legal sector. Before the recommendations were announced, 71% were in favour of the general notion of greater opportunity for racial representation, but when the specific idea of how this would happen was cited in the October survey — reserved election after five terms where a racial community has not been represented — this dropped to 41%. Also, less than half of the respondents in the October poll (45%) thought that the new private sector criteria were necessary to improve the EP.

Open discussion

The discussion featured a range of topics. One theme concerned the process of selecting the right person for the role of the EP. Did the size of the paid-up capital of the qualifying company or, as proposed, the shareholder equity, necessarily correlate to the ability of the person to perform the duties of the elected President? A participant suggested that large companies had more finances to “cover a multitude of sins”. Prof. Hsieh said that the best leaders of top large companies tended to have the qualities listed in his presentation, although not all of them did. In addition, Prof. Hsieh had come across other Singaporeans outside the 691 companies that would make the cut-off of S\$500 million in shareholder’s equity, who possessed these leadership qualities too. The question is how important those qualities are. There has been a disproportionate amount of attention on the financial eligibility criteria even though it is not the only qualifying benchmark, said Prof. Hsieh. There is also the deliberative track where the Presidential Elections Committee (PEC) can examine the suitability of persons for the role. In response to a participant who suggested the use of interviews rather than elections in selecting candidates with suitable traits, Prof. Hsieh said that this was an important opportunity to consider having processes that would best help detect the necessary qualities of a President and hoped that the PEC would consider this.

In response to a participant on what the reserved elections did in moving Singapore to a race-blind society, Mr Theseira said that the Eurasian Association did feel that when one starts to engineer an outcome, there is a need to think of its impact. He had no answer of what to do other than to go back to appointing the President. It is his hope that over time, the reserved election approach would not be needed because Singaporeans have become race-blind.

Participants had questions on the sampling and representativeness of the Blackbox survey. One participant asked if the sample was reflective of the socio-economic strata of Singapore. Mr Black responded that the Blackbox survey was indeed representative, and that the survey showed that 37% of individuals were not tuning into the conversation on the reforms to the EP, referring to his October poll in his presentation.

In response to a question on whether the media had an impact on public perception of the reforms to the EP, Mr Black said that media’s framing of the issue would influence polls anywhere in the world. He highlighted that the results of his polls had been consistent over the past months.

On the question of whether members of the CPA are selected in a time-staggered fashion, Asst. Prof. Neo explained that nominations are conducted when CPA appointments expire and do not reset each time a new President is elected, for institutional continuity. Furthermore, CPA members nominated by the President are not meant to be his proxies; they are independent advisors.

A participant suggested that two persons with different skill sets, say in financial knowledge and on public service, be appointed to the CPA to guide the President. Asst. Prof. Neo explained that the President is indeed a person who has to fulfil many duties. In this regard, it is entirely conceivable that an eight person CPA can manage the duties. The proposed constitutional amendments seek to make sure that nominating parties of the CPA take into account the need to exercise these different areas of expertise. It would not seem like there is need to have two different persons advise the President separately on financial matters and

public service appointments. This is the case unless more drastic changes are considered, at which point Asst. Prof. Neo said, Singapore could consider the creation of an upper house or senate instead to exercise advisory functions in a manner that is visible to the public.

In the closing remarks, Mr Theseira agreed with Prof. Hsieh's point that the selection criteria of the President should be holistic. He also suggested that perhaps interviews of potential candidates by a committee might be held publicly so voters could be better informed about candidates. He hoped the PEC might consider doing that. Asst. Prof. Neo emphasised the importance of an engaged electorate; that democracy is not just about voting, but of citizens engaging in deliberative processes in-between. An engaged electorate would make Singapore's democracy stronger, as the democratic institutions are only as good as the citizens who make them. Mr Black spoke of the importance of public engagement so that people would understand the proposals and how these shape the workings of the EP.

Session Two: The Elected Presidency



Minister of Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam (left) and Chairperson of Session Two, Dean Kishore Mahbubani (right) after the forum.

The second session was a dialogue with Minister of Law and Home Affairs, K. Shanmugam, chaired by the Dean of the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Kishore Mahbubani. The session discussed the origins and workings of the EP system in detail, as well as the reasoning behind the proposed reforms to the system. This record organises the discussion based on a broad categorisation of the topics raised.

The process that led to suggested reforms

Minister Shanmugam said that once the rationale for the EP system is well understood, the need for the current set of reforms would also be understood.

He explained that as far back as the 1980s, the government was worried about the possibility of future governments spending the reserves that had been accumulated by governments before them and felt it was important to have a check-and-balance system on a government's power to expend reserves. Citing Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Minister Shanmugam highlighted that the President would need the moral authority to say "no", which meant that he had to be elected. The other concern was that the integrity of the public service also had to be protected, in case unsuitable people were appointed to the system. For those reasons, the President now has the power to say "no" over reserves as well as appointments. What should not be forgotten is that these were grafted into the existing ceremonial role of the President, which is to be a symbol of the nation.

The key questions from that position then are, first, whether one believes there should be the EP to check on the government in those areas. If one agrees, then the next question would be whether there should be some pre-qualifying criteria for selecting such a President. In surveys on the matter, a majority of people said that there should be some criteria. Once one believes that should be the case, then the next question would be whether the criteria should be reviewed periodically, and whether they should be reviewed now, as it has been 25 years since the existing criteria was set in place.

A participant asked if the proposed reforms were taking place too quickly, given that the initial process of formulating the system took seven years. Another question was whether the reforms would be reviewed by a select committee of the Parliament. The Minister was also asked if the Party Whip would be lifted when Parliament decides on the reforms.

Minister Shanmugam said at different points of the discussion that there is a significant difference between the original formulation of the system and the current process of discussing reforms. The initial process took a significantly longer period back then because the country was creating a new and unique institution; there was more to consider and more was unknown.

Since then, the usual procedure to reforming the system was for the government to consider a path of action, consult experts with special knowledge in the area to contribute to the process, and then put out a Bill and explain it in Parliament. Ultimately, if the government were right, people would accept it, and if the government were wrong, it would "pay a political price for it," he said.

This time around however, there has been considerable public consultation, starting with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong appointing a Constitutional Commission, which then invited the public to submit views. It received over a hundred written submissions, 19 oral representations, four rounds of public hearings as well as multiple rounds of public consultation since the release of the government's White Paper response to the Commission's report. In that regard, his estimation was that government leaders would have spoken to about 8,000 people about the proposed changes.

This round of reform was, to him, far more comprehensive in scope and participation than previous rounds of reforms. Given all that, it is unlikely that new ideas would emerge to justify further rounds of public consultation. On the question of lifting the Party Whip, Minister Shanmugam said that it is not the government's practice to do so.

Views on the proposals

The need for the President to be elected and the role of the Council of Presidential Advisers

Minister Shanmugam went through the three terms of reference given to the Constitutional Commission to consider — the first related to review the criteria to qualify to be a Presidential candidate that was instituted in 1991; the second was to try to ensure that there would be some form of minority representation in the elected presidency; the third, was to review the role of the CPA in relation to that of the President.

In addition, the Commission, he noted, also dealt with a fourth question of whether to do away with having a system of elections. The Minister said that philosophically, the President would need the moral authority to say “no” to the Prime Minister of the day in the areas where the President has veto power. The Minister also said that on a practical point, he asked what the reaction of Singaporeans would be to the proposal of scrapping the system of electing a President. The Minister said, “I don’t think it is do-able” even if some may think it is.

On the point that was raised earlier in the afternoon on whether the CPA then functioned like a senate, the Minister said that when the EP was being designed, it was decided that the idea of an elected upper house or a senate instead would not work for a small country like Singapore. However, some of the functions of a senate had been grafted into the EP in relation to the decisions on reserves and appointments. The President now has a committee of wise people with a broad set of skills to tap on, that offers the President its independent, unvarnished advice. The Minister said that the system has worked very well, emphasising earlier that it is a system that is unique with no absolute parallel anywhere in the world. Government survey data showed that about 65% of respondents supported the strengthening of the CPA.

Minister Shanmugam also related a story to indicate how it would be a very serious matter when the President does have to exercise custodial power. In 2008, during the Great Financial Crisis, the Cabinet, after a great deal of deliberation, deemed it necessary to guarantee all bank deposits in Singapore. At the time, there were many questions on the health of the banks internationally, and a few other nations in Asia were promising to guarantee bank deposits. The Cabinet feared that if Singapore did not do the same, it would see money being pulled out of Singaporean banks. On the other hand, the Cabinet also asked itself, why should taxpayers’ money be used to guarantee private bank accounts? Eventually, after robust discussion, it was agreed that the government had to turn to the reserves for the S\$150 billion guarantee — as an indicator for comparison, this was equivalent to half of Singapore’s Central Provident Fund savings at the time. These are the sorts of consequential decisions that will be put before the President, said the Minister.

The eligibility criteria

Another set of questions had to do with the magnitude of the increase in the qualification criteria, and what would become of candidates in a previous election would no longer qualify under the new criteria. Would the size of the qualifying organisations for private sector candidates be adjusted for the current dollar value of what those companies were worth previously after taking inflation into account?

Minister Shanmugam showed the scale of economic change in the 25 years since the qualifications were first introduced. Nominal GDP had increased from S\$70 billion dollars to S\$400 billion dollars; the Central Provident Fund balances had increased from S\$40 billion dollars to S\$300 billion dollars. The qualification criteria, which would have allowed for candidates from 158 companies in Singapore to qualify would now allow for 691 companies, more than four times as many companies. This was not only noted by the government; the Chairman of the PEC — the group whose role is to decide if individuals met the criteria to run for President, had also written to the government in 2011, stating that the government “really ought to relook the criteria”.

In his replies, the Minister also highlighted that the change of criteria could have been more drastic. In 1991, the criterion was set at S\$100 million in paid-up capital. This allowed leaders of the top 158 companies in Singapore to qualify. Comparatively, companies of that size today would have over S\$1 billion in paid-up capital. The change to S\$500 million in shareholder equity, at any point of time in the past 20 years, which is the “look back” period that is now being proposed, is less exacting than the 15 years proposed by the Constitutional Commission.

He also urged questioners to consider that the specific qualification criterion — the S\$500 million of shareholder equity — is merely one means of qualification, and that they should not “get overly fixated” with that requirement. He reminded them that there is a deliberative track for attaining qualification. An individual can appeal to the PEC by showing its members that the role one played in the company is of equivalent complexity, for instance because it has a very large regional or international footprint, despite the company not meeting the precise threshold of being S\$500 million in shareholder equity.

The Minister also addressed the concerns by referring to survey data that indicated that 66% of respondents felt that the government’s motivation for introducing these reforms now is a sincere effort.

He said that any reform made to the qualification criteria is likely to leave some people out, as well as qualify some others who would otherwise be excluded, and it would be inappropriate to make qualification criteria based on how it would or would not qualify certain individuals. Instead, the criteria should be based on what is appropriate for the system. The Minister said he was sure that “future candidates... if they are people of a Presidential timbre, will be the first people to say ‘don’t look at me, make sure the system works””.

Questions on race

Also of note were questions regarding the issue of racial representation in the EP. A participant asked if this is necessary, as responses to general questions on the issue in surveys can be quite different than if a real and specific choice is put across. The participant cited names of racial minority politicians who had won seats in Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) in previous parliamentary elections to illustrate the point.

The Minister replied by asking if the questioner believed that race is a factor in shaping how people vote, to which the questioner said that race might have some relevance. The Minister said that in that case, they would both agree on that point, and that he would go on to address the specific cases the participant mentioned.

It should be noted that earlier in the dialogue session, the Minister had discussed this aspect of the reform when prompted by the Chairperson to say a few words about it. The Minister said that many had asked him, “We are a meritocratic society, why do we need this?”

The Minister said that Singapore has progressed in building a multiracial society, and is in a better situation than most countries, but the key question is whether there remains a likelihood that 10%, 15%, or 20% of the voting population may be swung by factors of race, especially when there is a choice between two people of equal ability in a Presidential election. Taking a pre-emptive approach, since the Singapore government has always been interventionist when it comes to fostering multiracialism, he said that over a very long period of time, if there has not been a President of a certain minority race, then the claim that the President represents the soul of the entire nation-state would ring hollow.

For that reason, the Commission was asked to consider the issue, and its recommendation was a very minimalist solution — a five-term hiatus-triggered system that applies to all racial groups, including the Chinese. The Minister cited American senate elections where there have only been four duly-elected African-American senators in the country’s 230 years, and also the difference in the level of support for the American President, Barack Obama, between the white and African-Americans, to suggest how race mattered there. For the case of Singapore, the Minister cited survey data drawn from the CNA-IPS survey on racial preferences for the role of Prime Minister and President, which suggested the same point — each race prefers members of its own race, with the Malays preferring Chinese to Indian after its own member; and the Indians also preferring Chinese to Malays after its own member.

The Minister also cited survey data collected by REACH as well as private polling company Blackbox Research. These showed that as many as 60% of the respondents support the idea that some sort of measure must be taken to ensure racial representation in the presidency. The support drops when the specific solution of the hiatus-triggered mechanism was posed to respondents. However, more respondents from minority racial groups would support the specific proposal than Chinese respondents.

Back to the Minister’s response on the question of election results by minority politicians in the SMCs, he said that the outcomes were first shaped by the premium afforded by the candidates’ party branding; then the qualities of the specific candidates; and then the race of the candidates. Thus, race might play a smaller role in SMC elections. Here, the key question is whether it would be enough of a factor in Presidential elections such as to lead to a situation where minority candidates are shut out for a long period of time without any special provision in place. A “judgment call” must be made about this and this is therefore the context for the proposed reform.

Other Issues

A few other questions were raised, with one participant asking the Minister if there would be more public education to all strata of Singaporean society about the presidency. The Minister replied that the presidency’s various aspects are indeed complicated to grasp. It is therefore important to ensure that information about the presidency is made available. The Commission process was a boon in this respect, because of the increased interest and coverage it received, but the Minister also said that more needs to be done.

The final question of the session was whether a new citizen could come forward to become President. The Minister acknowledged that this is possible, but urged the questioner and the audience to have faith in the electorate. While pre-qualification criteria would ensure that a candidate has the basics to be President, ultimately it is for the electorate to assess the candidate's character and past contribution to community and country.

In closing, Chairperson Dean Mahbubani reiterated the point that Singapore's EP is *sui generis*, an entirely new type of institution that is very different from other types of presidency around the world. It is Singapore's attempt to follow its own path. Thus it is very important that Singaporeans take every opportunity to understand it better.

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