

Halimah Yacob a front runner in presidential race: Observers

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Speaker has long history of public service and is a well-known figure in the community

Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob, who last night declared she would run in the presidential election, is a front runner who stands out from the other hopefuls who have thrown their hats into the ring, said political observers.

"Madam Halimah is undeniably the pacesetter among the three potential candidates, given her long track record of public service, and her being a recognisable figure not just among the Malays but also among the other ethnic groups," said ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute research fellow Mustafa Izzuddin.

With her long history of public service, she is likely to be backed by a range of groups including unions, social service organisations and women's groups.

Observers also noted that she automatically qualifies on two counts.

First, she was certified a member of the Malay community when running in the 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2015 general elections. Second, she has been Speaker since 2013, longer than the required three years spelled out in the Constitution.

Neither of the other two potential candidates - property firm chief Mohamed Salleh Marican, 67, nor marine sector company chairman Farid Khan, 62, meet the minimum of \$500 million in shareholder equity set for private-sector candidates.

But the Presidential Elections Committee has the discretion to allow a candidate who does not automatically meet the criteria to stand.

PASSION TO SERVE

I have decided to offer myself as a candidate for the elected presidency. Though I will miss my residents, my constituency work and my role as Speaker in running for the office of the elected president, my passion to serve all Singaporeans remains unabated. It is a heavy responsibility but I hope that with the support of Singaporeans, we can do more good together.

MADAM HALIMAH YACOB

Said Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) deputy director Gillian Koh: "She will be an outstanding candidate given her many years of public service, her visibility as a political leader and her standing with the union movement as well as support on the ground."

Watchers are largely doubtful that Madam Halimah's close association with the People's Action Party (PAP) would hurt her chances of victory.

Dr Koh noted that President Tony Tan Keng Yam and the late president Ong Teng Cheong both resigned from the PAP to run, and won.

An IPS Presidential Election Survey of 2,025 Singaporeans in 2011 found voters ranked honesty, fairness and the ability to represent as the most important qualities they wanted in a presidential candidate.

Independence from political parties and resonance with candidates' views on national issues were least important to respondents.

Madam Halimah is also well liked in the Malay-Muslim community, observers noted. Said Dr Mustafa: "Her announcement will be warmly welcomed by the Malay community because of her close attachment and invaluable contribution to the community as a public figure."

National Development Minister Lawrence Wong praised Madam Halimah for the care she has taken with her residents, and her dedication in improving Marsiling.

"In her two years in Marsiling, she has truly made a significant impact on the ground, and made a difference in the lives of many residents," he told reporters last night.

Grassroots leaders and residents in Marsiling expressed support for Madam Halimah's candidacy but said they would be sad to see her go.

Marsiling resident Prethu Ann Joshua, 39, a pre-school teacher, said the MP has always treated residents sincerely, and often asked after the welfare of those who were ill or in need of financial help.

Grassroots leader Clarence Goh, 64, said residents of all ages and races took to her quickly in her two years there as she was always humble and had no airs. "She made us understand what grassroots work is all about," he said.

On whether her resignation would trigger a by-election in Marsiling- Yew Tee GRC, Mr Wong said the issue was discussed in Parliament in February. Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing had said a by-election will not be called if a minority candidate leaves his GRC.

Said Mr Wong: "Parliament has already given a response. I think our focus and our priority is to make sure the residents are well served. That is what we will do."