

Halimah Yacob set to be next president

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Ex-Speaker only one to get eligibility cert, will file nomination papers tomorrow

Madam Halimah Yacob is set to be Singapore's eighth president and its first woman head of state this week, in the country's first presidential election reserved for candidates from the Malay community.

The 63-year-old former Speaker of Parliament was the only presidential hopeful declared eligible to contest by the Presidential Elections Committee (PEC) yesterday.

"Whether there is an election or not, my passion and commitment to serve the people of Singapore remain the same," she told reporters.

She collected her certificate of eligibility at the Elections Department in the afternoon, shortly after witnessing the election of her successor as Speaker in Parliament.

The PEC's decision all but concludes a process that began when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong mooted a review of the elected presidency early last year.

A Constitutional Commission recommended changes to guarantee minority representation in the highest office in the land as well as to tighten eligibility criteria in keeping with the economy's growth.

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I promise to do the best that I can to serve the people of Singapore, and that doesn't change whether there is an election or no election. My passion and commitment to serve the people of Singapore remain the same.

MADAM HALIMAH YACOB

Having held a key public office - the post of Speaker of Parliament - since 2013, Madam Halimah was the only one of three Malay hopefuls automatically eligible to run.

All three were issued certificates by the Community Committee confirming that they belong to the Malay community.

But the PEC informed the other two - marine services firm chairman Farid Khan, 61, and property company chief executive Salleh Marican, 67 - that they did not qualify to contest. Neither had helmed a company with \$500 million in shareholder equity for the most recent three years, a key threshold required for candidates relying on their private-sector experience.

Mr Salleh showed his letter from the PEC to The Straits Times. In rejecting his application, the six-member panel said it was unable to satisfy itself that he had "the experience and ability" comparable to a chief executive of a company of that size and complexity.

The PEC noted the shareholders' equity of Mr Salleh's company, Second Chance, averaged about \$258 million, a sum "considerably below the minimum" required under the Constitution.

Mr Farid declined to disclose his company's financials, but its value is believed to be much lower. He declined to show his letter from the PEC to the media.

Both said they were disappointed not to be given the go-ahead - but thanked their families and supporters for their support over the past few months, and said they would continue to serve Singaporeans.

Under the law, the decision of the PEC - chaired by Public Service Commission chairman Eddie Teo - is final and not subject to appeal or review in any court.

The uncontested election drew mixed reactions from observers, who welcomed Madam Halimah making history as the country's first woman president and the first Malay head of state in 47 years.

Institute of Policy Studies deputy director Gillian Koh said: "Madam Halimah is a double minority - not only is she a Malay-Muslim individual, but a female."

But Dr Koh felt "the statement of our acceptance of diversity would have been all the more powerful if there had been an open contest".

However, political science professor Bilveer Singh of the National University of Singapore questioned the value of having a contest for a contest's sake: "Being elected through a walkover does not undermine or delegitimise the winner."

Tomorrow, Madam Halimah will turn up with her proposer, seconder and at least four assentors at the People's Association HQ in King George's Avenue to file her nomination papers.

If all is in order, she will be declared president-elect shortly after nominations close at noon.

She will then take her oath of office on Thursday, which will mark the start of her six-year term.