

Hri Kumar on GRCs: Race still matters

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RACE still matters to some Singaporeans, said Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC MP Hri Kumar Nair.

This is why Singapore's group representation constituency (GRC) system must stay, as it ensures ethnic minority voices in Parliament.

Sharing his personal experience, Mr Nair said one of his Chinese residents confessed to him last month to having felt unsettled that she was being represented in Parliament by an Indian.

"She said, 'I've known you for six years, but I have the courage to tell you only now. You came in replacing a Chinese MP,'" recounted Mr Nair on Wednesday during a Straits Times (ST) forum.

He was one of five panellists discussing recent survey findings on the progress made on key election issues since 2011.

Mr Nair had replaced Mr Leong Horn Kee as the People's Action Party (PAP) candidate in Thomson-Toa Payoh, a ward in the Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC, when Mr Leong retired from politics in 2006.

"When she and her group of friends found out that an Indian was coming, they all felt, 'Oh dear, what's going to happen? Are our issues going to be dealt with in the same way?'" said Mr Nair.

"She accepts now that there was no rational basis for that, but that was a gut instinct."

Mr Nair was responding to a question from audience member Dr Yeoh Teng Kwong, who was invited as a Straits Times reader.

Dr Yeoh asked whether it was time to return to a single-seat system, so candidates could fight on their own merits and voters could choose the most capable MP.

He cited Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam as someone whom many "think very highly of".

He said: "Nobody thinks what race he is. We just admire him for his own attributes. Please don't underestimate us."

Singapore's electoral map was made up entirely of single seats until the GRC system was introduced in 1988 to ensure minority representation in Parliament.

In a GRC, at least one MP must be from a minority community.

Mr Nair said that while race does not matter for many, it still matters for some, as "there is a certain comfort in dealing with someone who speaks the same language, who looks like you".

"I'm from a minority race, so I can tell you first-hand. When I go door-to-door... when residents can't converse with me, they naturally turn to someone else because I can't understand them. So these things do matter. And we cannot just brush them aside."

He added that if race matters to even 10 per cent of voters now, this would be even more critical "especially in the coming years when 10 per cent represents a real swing... that 10 per cent may well determine an election".

In the 2011 General Election, the PAP won 60.1 per cent of the popular vote, its lowest since independence, and Mr Nair predicts the margin will narrow further.

"You can run an election and everyone can field minority candidates and majority candidates and just hope that it won't matter to the electorate.

"But I can tell you from a minority perspective that if it turns out that no minorities get in, it will be a disaster," he said.

Fellow panellist and Workers' Party (WP) chairman Sylvia Lim also said voters in GRCs are more likely to vote based on the candidates' party than their individual attributes.

In an ST survey of more than 500 Singaporeans last month, respondents gave a candidate's attributes an average score of 4.11 out of five, one being not important and five very important, in their choice of MP. The candidate's party's score was 4.09.

But choosing between party and individual was "more of a real question" in single-seat wards, said Ms Lim, who noted that 86 per cent of voters are in GRCs.

"If you're faced with the choice of, say, (two) teams of five people... if you like two on one side and three on the other, what do you do? It's very hard and that's why I think voters are put in a spot when it comes to this sort of thing," she said.



CHECKS AND BALANCES WITHIN PARTY EFFECTIVE?

When I was in Parliament, what struck me was PAP MPs actually criticise a lot and ask a lot of questions. But are the backbencher checks and balances effective, if they were not effective in getting the Government to change course before the 2011 elections?

- Mr Siew Kum Hong, former Nominated Member of Parliament, on whether backbenchers provide adequate checks and balances on the Government



POTENTIAL ISSUES THAT COULD BLINDSIDE PARTIES?

Looking back, we were kind of blindsided by the issues raised (at the last election). We seem to be looking at the rearview mirror in the survey as well. So do you see any issue that could stand out in the coming election, that's not on the survey?

- Dr Chua Hak Bin, Bank of America-Merrill Lynch economist asking the panel what other new issues may crop up



HOW FAR WILL OPPOSITION 'PUSH' AN ISSUE?

The foreign workers issue has led to borderline xenophobia in some small but fairly loud quarters. It's anecdotal, but a lot stems from the 2011 elections. So how far (will the) opposition push (an) agenda when you sense it is pushing society to a tipping point? In the election fever, it could be a trump card for a political party to win.

- Mr Martin Tan, executive director of the Halogen Foundation and a PAP member, asking WP chairman Sylvia Lim how the party decides when to stop pushing certain agendas, such as the foreigner issue



LOSING ABLE CANDIDATES DUE TO GRC SYSTEM

In our current electoral system, many good candidates stand the risk of being sacrificed when the whole GRC is lost to the opposition party. So perhaps it's time to review going back to a single-seat electoral system where candidates would fight on their own merits.

- Reader Yeoh Teng Kwong on whether or not the country should move back to an electoral system with just single-member constituencies



ROLE OF NON-BREAD-AND-BUTTER ISSUES

The survey shone its spotlight on bread-and-butter issues, (but) you have other issues such as media regulation, LGBT rights. How important are these non-bread-and-butter issues to the electorate?"

- Dr Carol Soon, from the Institute of Policy Studies on how much non-bread-and-butter issues will matter in the coming election



BLURRING OF RELIGION AND POLITICS?

With increasing religiosity in Singapore, are candidates' religious affiliations, as well as the party's stance on policy issues with religious leanings, going to play a critical role?

- National University of Singapore student Soh Yi Da, on whether a politician's or political party's religious stance will play a deciding role in future elections