

Minority candidate elected at restricted presidential poll 'may lack gravitas, political legitimacy'

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A president elected in a restricted election held specifically for minority candidates may lack gravitas and political legitimacy, said Dr Gillian Koh from the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

Such a president is also like to be seen as a token representative of the racial group he comes from, she added on Tuesday, at the third hearing on proposed changes to the elected presidency.

Dr Koh, who is deputy director at the IPS, was giving her views at the hearings by the Constitutional Commission set up to review the office of the president. Her submission to the commission on the issue was made with IPS researcher Tan Min-Wei.

She said Singapore's president should be chosen based on merit and whether he can uphold the principle of multiracialism.

Instead of changing the laws to ensure that particular races are elected at presidential polls from time to time, there should be a greater push to seek out members of minority races and to encourage them to contest, she suggested.

Public Service Commission chairman Eddie Teo, a member of the commission, said the same stringent criteria would be applied to all candidates, even those in closed elections.

"Why do you say specifying ethnicity goes against the concept of merit and why should candidate be regarded as a token representative and lacking in gravitas and political legitimacy if he's standing in such (a closed minority) election?" he asked.

Dr Koh said that even if candidates are just as meritorious in such elections, a segment of voters may inevitably view them as "someone who was not open to a complete contest across the nation".

She said that introducing measures to guarantee that minority candidates are elected can also signal that minority communities require help.

Since Singapore is already on the "journey" towards elections where candidates are evaluated based on merit, "we don't want to stop this process of growing that multiracial ethos", she added.

She also said there is no empirical data to show if Singaporeans vote along racial lines at presidential elections.

Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, who chairs the commission, noted that most of those who spoke at the hearings had said it is important that minority candidates are elected from time to time. He asked if the system should be given a "nudge" from time to time.

Citing another academic who spoken at an earlier hearing, he asked if measures could be put in place to limit elections for a particular community that has not had a president from the community for a few terms.

Dr Koh said this could result in those communities not putting in the effort to put forward candidates during those years where elections are not closed.

Mr Tan, her IPS colleague, suggested simplifying the process of applying to be a presidential candidate to encourage more people to come forward.

The commission was appointed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in February to review three aspects of the elected presidency.

The three areas are: the eligibility criteria for candidates; provisions for minority candidates to have a chance of being elected from time to time; and changes to ensure members of the Council of Presidential Advisers have experience in the public and private sectors.

The public hearings are being held at the Supreme Court auditorium. The fourth and last hearing will be on May 6.

Those invited to speak by the Constitutional Commission were among more than 100 individuals and groups who had sent in their views on the matter during a public consultation. A total of 19 individuals and groups accepted the invitation to give their views at the hearings.