

Observers happy for Halimah Yacob, but disappointed at no-contest for first reserved presidential election

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Singapore's first reserved presidential election all but ended before even getting off the ground, following yesterday's announcement that only Madam Halimah Yacob qualifies to run for office.

Although the 63-year-old is still required to submit her papers on Nomination Day tomorrow, the presidential bids of her potential rivals - Mr Salleh Marican and Mr Farid Khan - have ended. Both men failed as their applications for the certificate of eligibility did not pass muster.

Observers and MPs interviewed said the denouement was an expected, if anticlimactic, end to months of public consultations and forums as well as parliamentary debates about the review of the elected presidency.

From the start, Madam Halimah's name was floated as a possible candidate and, soon, she became the front runner. But they also had mixed feelings about the outcome, acknowledging disappointment at the likely walkover while welcoming the Presidential Elections Committee's decision not to lower the bar.

Many Singaporeans had hoped for the chance to choose their president, said Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad. "On the one hand, I am very happy for Madam Halimah, as she would make a very good president. But many Singaporeans were hoping for a contest because they felt they had a democratic right to vote."

ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute fellow Norshahril Saat noted that electoral contests give winners an element of legitimacy and voters the chance to know candidates better through their campaigns.

"A section of Singapore will be upset by the news. But there are certain standards to meet and it is good to disqualify those who did not meet them," he said.

Neither Mr Farid nor Mr Salleh qualified under the newly amended stricter criteria. Their companies fell far short of the \$500 million shareholder equity threshold spelt out in the Constitution.

Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) deputy director Gillian Koh said: "If the Presidential Elections Committee were to award individuals who ran companies that are clearly below that explicit \$500 million mark, they would have to explain in detail how their experience made up for the shortfall."

This decision must be viewed as credible and able to be upheld, she said, adding: "The credibility and legitimacy of the system are at stake."

IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews said: "It would have been problematic for our ideals of meritocracy if the bar had to be lowered to accommodate a minority community, so that there could be a contest."

With no contest in sight, some will question Madam Halimah's legitimacy as president, particularly those who believe others could have qualified in a less restrictive race.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said: "Madam Halimah, when elected, will have to bear the burden of doubts about her legitimacy. It is unfair, but these perceptions are there."

Still, she did qualify according to the system, and this is what really matters, Dr Mathews said.

Experts said Madam Halimah can take a leaf from the late president S R Nathan's book. "She should continue her efforts to touch people's hearts and minds. She can be like Mr Nathan, who won in walkovers but is remembered as the people's president," said Dr Norshahril.

Mr Nathan was elected uncontested in 1999 and 2005.

Observers like Professor Tan said the outcome should prompt more eligible people from all races to step forward and run, whether in an open or reserved election.

"I hope this will be the first and last reserved election. We can be the beacon of multiracialism especially without the need for a reserved election," he added.