

Panel's take on changes to elected presidency: Reserved races - right direction but will they work?

Rachel Au-Yong

The Straits Times, 18 September 2016

Are reserved-race presidential elections a clever solution to ensure multiracialism? Or are they something that minority groups themselves may not find all that workable?

At a Straits Times roundtable discussion on changes to the elected presidency last Friday, panellists discussed the pros and cons of the "hiatus-triggered" framework.

Under this model, an election is reserved for a particular race if no one from that group has been president for five continuous terms.

On one hand, Institute of Policy Studies deputy director Gillian Koh saw the move as a "nudge towards multiracialism".

It would also go hand-in-hand with Singapore's other ideal, meritocracy, as the proposed higher eligibility criteria would apply to all elections.

Dr Koh said she had initially disagreed with the provision, fearing it would lead to heightened race differences but was heartened that the provision is meant to be a fallback.

"I live with it because it is a five-term hiatus before the provision kicks in," she said.

On the other hand, Nominated MP Azmoon Ahmad was concerned that the higher criteria would shrink an already small pool of Malay candidates even further.

His worry was compounded by his observation that of those Malays who are qualified, most would prefer not to put themselves up for election. "I hope that there will be more Malays coming forward offering themselves (as candidates), maybe in the coming 10 years," he said.

Dr Koh concurred, noting a lack of Malay candidates who have put themselves up since the elected presidency scheme was introduced in 1991.

The panel concluded that two things must happen to change this.

First, minority candidates must, well, volunteer.

"We really want to encourage the community to... not be scared and feel that the election process is so churlish because you have to trumpet yourself and offer yourself for the position," said Dr Koh.

Second, it is also the responsibility of society to overcome any racial biases it might have. Panellists cited recent surveys that had shown that a significant number of Singaporeans preferred their leaders to be someone from their own race.

Said National University of Singapore assistant law professor Cheah Wui Ling: "We also have to reach out across community lines... and encourage them to run."

She wanted the Government to take more active steps, such as in educational policies, to address the problem of voting along racial lines.

Law Minister K. Shanmugam agreed that more education would help, but said such biases are part of "human nature".

However, Singaporeans have come a long way: "We must not overstate it. The majority of Singaporeans can look past race."

He attributed this to the "practical" ways that Singapore has dealt with its different races: "We didn't, like France, ignore the differences and say they didn't matter."