

Presidential Election 2017: Question of who is Malay continues to be raised

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As Singapore gets ready for its first presidential election reserved for Malay candidates, the question of who is a Malay has surfaced.

The issue was the focus of a panel at the Institute of Policy Studies forum on the reserved election, with speakers noting that the three presidential hopefuls continue to be dogged by doubts about their race.

They have declared themselves members of the Malay community, but some note Mr Farid Khan's identity card states he is Pakistani, and Madam Halimah Yacob and Mr Salleh Marican have Indian fathers.

Under the Constitution, a person is a member of the community he considers himself part of, and if he is accepted as such by the community, with a Community Committee making this call.

Ancestry, said ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute fellow Norshahril Saat, is a point that has cropped up in online discussions on what makes a person a Malay. But, he said: "If you follow ancestry strictly, then no candidate would qualify as a Malay. Inter-ethnic marriages have made this perspective irrelevant, and it is difficult to find a pure Malay."

Another view is that a person is Malay if he speaks Malay, follows Malay customs and is Muslim. Dr Norshahril said in Singapore, there are many sub-ethnic groups - such as Javanese - subsumed under the Malay category. "What binds them together is religion, language and Malay culture. Some Indian Muslims and Pakistanis associate themselves with Malays. They speak the language, practise Malay culture and the Malays accept them as such."

But law professor Kevin Tan asked whether a person born into a Malay family who decides to leave Islam would be accepted as a Malay. Dr Norshahril said: "I am not sure if the community is ready. If you look at the sentiment on the ground today... you must be a Muslim."

Lianhe Zaobao editor Goh Sin Teck said questions have also been raised when it comes to defining a Chinese. Religion does not play a definite role, and "the fact that you can't speak a word of Chinese doesn't mean you are not Chinese".

Asked by a participant if a person can identify as belonging to two races, Prof Tan said to laughter: "So long as you are accepted by the communities of those two races."