

## **Reserved elections 'critical as president serves unifying role': Shanmugam**

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The changes to the elected presidency to ensure multiracial representation are important because of the president's role as a "unifying symbol of the country", Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam said yesterday.

Without amendments to reserve elections for minorities, this symbolic role may be called into question - especially if "the president, term after term, comes from a single race", he added.

He acknowledged that some Singaporeans do not agree with the idea of reserved elections - but he noticed many would come around after being given the full facts.

Still, this is an issue on which "reasonable people can differ" he said, adding: "The fact that we were able to talk about it, debate it... in a way it helps strengthen the overall multiracial fabric."

Mr Shanmugam was speaking at an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) forum on the reserved presidential election.

He covered a range of issues related to the presidency, including the stricter qualifying criteria for private-sector candidates and how a candidate's race is determined.

His remarks come as Singapore gets ready to elect its next president on Sept 23. Only Malay candidates can take part in this election, under new laws that reserve the election for a community, if no one from that community has been president for the last five terms.

The minister also disclosed the initial plans were to reserve elections for two groups: the Malays, as well as Indian and Other communities. But feedback from the Chinese ground prompted the inclusion of Chinese reserved elections.

"When we discussed it with our MPs, past MPs, the Chinese intelligentsia, the Chinese media, the reaction was quite clear. If you have reservations for the Indians and the Malays, you better have reservation for the Chinese," he said.

On the president's symbolic role, Mr Shanmugam noted it has been part and parcel of the presidency since independence.

When the roles of safeguarding past reserves and the integrity of the public service were added to the presidency in 1991, the symbolic role was not "abrogated", he said, adding that in Britain, the most important role of the queen is also to represent and symbolise the nation.

The minister also cited evidence that race remains a factor when Singaporeans vote, making it harder for minority candidates to be elected president.

A survey by IPS and Channel NewsAsia last year showed among the Chinese, 96 per cent accept a Chinese president, but only 59 per cent accept a Malay president.

Such race differences are common worldwide, but many countries prefer a laissez-faire approach on race by the government. Some of them, including Germany and Britain, have in recent years acknowledged that such an approach has not enhanced integration.

In contrast, Singapore takes an interventionist approach, in the belief that leaving things to nature is dangerous because "the powerful forces (in society) are centrifugal", he said.

Interventions in Singapore include the introduction of group representation constituencies, race quotas in public housing and the outlawing of speech that hurts racial or religious sentiments.

Reserved elections are another step in this direction, he said, as he slammed critics for labelling these multiracial policies "the nonsense of 'race'".

This interventionist approach works, he said, noting: "You look at the state of our race relations in Singapore. I am prepared to compare that record against any other country. Compare it against the best in class. Our record speaks for itself."

A forum participant asked if the role of prime minister could be reserved for minorities, too.

Mr Shanmugam said there is a spectrum, ranging from complete laissez-faire to reservations for all posts. Singapore has chosen "a mixed system", with some reservations, he said.

"Whether you want to go all the way is a question of... what is doable, what the people will accept and also whether you need it... to strengthen our multiracial environment," he said.