

Unintended consequences?

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Analysts and MPs yesterday welcomed a panel's proposed changes for the elected presidency, but cautioned that some might lead to negative consequences if enacted.

They point to three possible changes that worry them. One, the more stringent eligibility criteria could reduce the number of minority candidates from the private sector, especially among Malays.

Two, the higher financial threshold for those in the private sector means more of them would be kept out of the contest. And with the greater likelihood of a public-sector candidate being elected, some say such a president would find it harder to be a check on the Government.

Three, reserving elections for minority candidates from time to time may cause some Chinese to vote only for Chinese candidates.

The reason: They feel that since minority races are already guaranteed a president of their own race, there is no need to vote for them in normal elections.

The reaction was most robust on the eligibility criteria of candidates.

The Constitutional Commission proposed in its report yesterday that private-sector candidates must have run large companies whose shareholders' equity is at least \$500 million. This is a change from the current threshold of \$100 million in paid-up capital.

The panel also recommended that if there was no president from a particular race for five terms, the next election should be reserved for candidates of that race.

Iseas - Yusof Ishak Institute fellow Norshahril Saat said the Malay community may find it hard to produce a private-sector candidate as there are relatively fewer of them compared with the other main races. Hence, its candidates would very likely be former ministers or Speakers of Parliament, unless the scheme is expanded to include junior ministers, he said.

But Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad said there are "a number" of Malays in top positions in business. "It has always been about whether they want to step forward."

But since reserved elections would occur once every 30 years, he did not think it would be "that difficult to find such a candidate".

Workers' Party (WP) chief Low Thia Khiang said last night that he foresees a president with a public-sector background struggling to act as a check on the Government.

"At the end of the day, who is qualified to stand as a candidate? It has to be from the Government, right? So who are they checking? Who is checking whom?" Mr Low said, adding that WP MPs would respond to the proposals in Parliament.

Institute of Policy Studies' Dr Gillian Koh and law don Eugene Tan think some Chinese voters may deliberately vote only for a Chinese when previously they may not have given much thought to a candidate's race.

Analysts welcomed the call against any easing of the eligibility criteria. Dr Koh said this effectively counters any perception of tokenism, or that a race may need a handicap for its candidate to successfully become president.