

Walkover or not, 'president represents all Singaporeans': Janil Puthucheary

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Whether Singapore's next president is elected in a contest or a walkover, he or she must be a president for all Singaporeans, said Senior Minister of State Janil Puthucheary.

But Dr Janil said he did not have an answer to whether a contested or uncontested election was better, a question he was asked during an Institute of Policy Studies forum yesterday on the reserved presidential election.

Mr Zainul Abidin Rasheed, a former senior minister of state who was at the forum, noted that the reserved election was introduced to make all Singaporeans feel included.

But it had "opened a can of worms", and discussions during the forum showed there is "a lot of division among Malays, among non- Malays", said Mr Zainul.

To avoid such divisions, he asked, was it better to have a contest or not have a contest?

It was not lost on the forum's participants that the election, to be held on Sept 23, may be a walkover, as two of the three presidential hopefuls do not immediately meet the criteria to run for the highest office in the land.

Former Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob is the only one who will automatically get the nod.

"The nominees are there, the process is there, we will have to see what happens," said Dr Janil, who is in the Ministry of Communications and Information, as well as Education.

His fellow panel member, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing, addressed a similar question on how to reconcile people's desire to vote with the possibility that the stricter standards now may see only one person qualifying.

The decision is for the Presidential Elections Committee to make, said Mr Chan.

But he argued that ensuring a contest should not come at the expense of relaxing the eligibility criteria for any single group.

"I can understand Singaporeans' aspirations to have a contest and more people contesting. But I don't think Singaporeans would like to have different rules for different races," said Mr Chan.

This would shift the balance too far in favour of multiracialism, without sufficient regard for meritocracy, he added.