

A speed bump towards our multiracial ideals

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Before 1991, Singapore's President played a symbolic role as Head of State and was appointed by Parliament, with a distinct purpose of ensuring that the position was rotated among members from the key ethnic communities of Singapore. As he represented the nation in his ceremonial and diplomatic roles, he could also be claimed to be a representative of his ethnic group.

In 1991, the President was given reactive executive power to veto the use of past national reserves, key appointments to the Civil Service presented by the Government, power over corruption investigations, detentions under the Internal Security Act, and injunctions issued under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act.

These custodial powers, which still stand today, demand that the President receive a political, electoral mandate. Candidates have to be pre-qualified, such that their past work record should suggest they have the wherewithal to make those judgments when needed. Merit and voter consent, and the sense of how the candidates represent what Singapore stands for, now trump ethnic representation.

In recent months, a Constitutional Commission has been tasked to consider how ethnic representation can return as a key consideration to the presidential election system.

It is clear from proposals submitted to the Commission and public hearings it hosted that several groups and representors have strong feelings about this. Some suggested that the contest allow for groups of two or three people that include a minority candidate. Winners would then take turns being President. One suggested that ballot papers be differentiated by colour according to the ethnic identity of voters, so that the support of minorities is considered in deciding the victor.

Our colleague Mathew Mathews has suggested a system where if a minority has not been elected over a span of time, and eligible minority candidates qualify to contest in the upcoming presidential election, then this should be a reserved election for the ethnic minorities. The question is whether such suggestions are a nudge towards Singapore's multiracial ideal as symbolised by our President or a speed bump to it. Our argument is that it is the latter.

For the singular and high-level role of the President, it is divisive to institutionalise an ethnic qualification for candidates even when this is provided as a contingency clause, as Dr Mathew suggests. It risks suggesting that a community's members are only good enough to be elected via a reserved election. The process intended to empower the community may have the opposite effect.

It hardens the notion that some ethnic communities require the handicap, a notion yet to be tested since there have been only two full-fledged elections for the presidency since the new system was introduced. There is simply no data to show that any racial group is incapable of presenting suitable candidates.

On the other hand, an Institute of Policy Studies survey conducted after the 2011 Presidential Election found that 85 per cent of 2,000 citizen respondents said they were confident a candidate of a minority community could be elected as President through the existing system. The lowest level of assent was from respondents of the “others” ethnic category compared with those of other ethnicity, but even then, 75 per cent agreed it was possible.

Taking the contingent provision necessitates limiting the potential field of candidates, blocking potentially other capable candidates not because they cannot perform the role of President, but because they are of the wrong ethnicity in the wrong year.

Merit or ethnic representation are not mutually exclusive, but in such a system, we will make a decision for one at the cost of the other, and invite controversy for a long time to come.

The suggestions of dispersing the custodial role to one other or several other team members via Vice-Presidents or presidential councils present other challenges too. It suggests that Singaporeans can and should continue to vote for leaders on ethnic lines, and what is already a residual role will become even more complex.

Bosnia-Herzegovina’s presidency, which is comparable with these suggestions, is considered one of the most complex in the world and is justified as a means to ensure representation of the key ethnic groups in a society that has endured nearly two decades of civil war. Our situation does not justify such extreme measures and complexity.

Rotating the power among team members of one or two others over a term of two or four years is also sub-optimal for the symbolic, ceremonial, diplomatic role of the President. Singaporeans and foreign friends will have to keep track of who is President and rebuild cultural and diplomatic capital with a new person ever so often. Also, who should go first: The majority team member or the minority one?

Adding an ethnic criterion gives impetus for the office to take an ethnic tone. What expectations would be placed on the winner of a reserved election if the mandate is owed to his ethnicity? Must that President give special attention to his community due to the belief that future presidents will not?

The solution to the issue at hand is for all ethnic communities to nurture talented individuals who can develop a national standing based on merit, public service and their multiracial sensibilities. They must assure their more outstanding, well-regarded members that they will not be considered self-promoting or power hungry, but that they will be honoured for their offer of public service as President.

Excessive caution can be detrimental, but so can undue eagerness. The journey towards a multiracial ideal may seem endless, but it is certainly an act of gravity-defying faith given a world ridden with sectarianism. We must not feed that divisiveness here.

While we have the safety net for ethnic representation in our powerful legislature through the Group Representation Constituency system, we should be cautious of speed bumps and even tempting shortcuts for the singular role of President that will lead us to more dangerous paths. The destination is worth hurrying to, but the process of getting there will determine if we even arrive.

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