

Analysts expect changes to be in effect for next poll

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Analysts TODAY interviewed expect the changes to the Elected Presidency (EP) to be in place for the next election, following Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's comments in an interview televised last night.

However, they cautioned that a mechanism of reserving polls for a particular race could unwittingly promote voting along racial lines, and end up hindering the chances for a minority candidate in the event of an open contest.

Nanyang Technological University's Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie said: "I think that (Mr Lee) was trying to sound the public out, and that this is indeed a proposal that the Government is seriously considering."

He added: "The proposal hinges on the way in which it is legislated, especially in terms of the time frame needed before a special election for minority candidates is called."

Singapore Management University (SMU) law don Eugene Tan pointed out that such a mechanism could have an adverse side effect.

"For example, voters might say the Malays are going to have their turn, so let's vote for the Chinese candidate," he said. "One of the reasons why I'm not in favour of this arrangement is because I don't think there's any magic to a Malay or Indian being a symbol of multiracialism. It's really what the person does in office that ultimately counts."

During the interview with Mediacorp, Mr Lee spoke about the recommendations of the Constitutional Commission tasked to review specific aspects of the EP scheme.

In particular, he floated what he described as the "least intrusive and most light-touch way" of ensuring minority representation: Reserving the Presidential Election to candidates of a particular race, if there has been no minority President of that race for four to six terms.

Closing off the election in this manner was akin to cherry-picking a particular race to become the next President, said political commentator Felix Tan of SIM Global Education. "If it's open and democratic, as far as Singapore's racial politics are concerned, it should be given to all other minority races, while the majority race should be kept out of it," Dr Tan said.

Nevertheless, he noted that in such a system, Singaporeans still have a chance to vote for their President, instead of reverting to the previous practice of having Parliament appoint a figurehead.

On when the changes should be implemented, Institute of Policy Studies deputy director Gillian Koh felt it "might be more sensible to start when the Constitution changes are made, rather than a retrospective application of it". She reiterated that the mechanism should be regarded as a safeguard. "We (should) prove as Singaporeans that ... we don't need to see such a reserve mechanism. Before (the timeline) is up, we have suitable candidates and candidates of a minority (race), especially of the Malay ethnicity, duly elected without this mechanism being used."

The next Presidential Election must be held by August next year. Given that the Malay community has not had a representative in the highest office of the land since Singapore's first President, Yusof Ishak, the analysts felt that there was a chance that the next election could be contested only among Malay candidates, if the proposed constitutional changes to the EP are passed in Parliament.

SMU's Assoc Prof Tan said: "The last time there was a Malay President was in 1970. That's 46 years ago and there have been four presidential elections since the EP scheme was introduced in 1990."

However, Associate Professor Alan Chong of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore felt it was "anyone's guess" whether the next election would be reserved for a particular race and what race it could be, noting the possibility that it could be reserved for either Malay or Eurasian candidates. The last Eurasian President was Benjamin Sheares who succeeded Yusof in 1971 after his death.