

Community groups across races welcome reserved election

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Community groups welcomed news that the next Presidential Election would be reserved for Malay candidates, calling it a timely move and a nod to Singapore's commitment to multiracialism.

Meanwhile, political observers saw Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob as one of the likeliest candidates from the public sector to stand in the polls due by August next year. Whether a contest would materialise, however, remains to be seen as no prospective candidates from outside the establishment immediately come to mind, they added.

President of the Malay Youth Literary Association Izzuddin Taherally said it has been "quite a while" since Singapore had a Malay president. "It is an honour for the community (to have this representation)."

Mr Alla'udin Mohamed, vice-chairman of Geylang Serai Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles, added that ensuring all races are represented in the presidency will result in "a more harmonious situation and the common space will be more colourful".

Mr Nur Amin Shah, 34, a communications manager, said the Malay community has progressed and there is a sense of pride towards achievements. "Of course, if we do have a representative, it does play an important role symbolically that everyone is treated fairly."

Other community groups also welcomed the move.

Mr Tan Aik Hock, a council member of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, said it further "emphasises" Singapore's belief in racial harmony. Young Sikh Association president Malminderjit Singh added that it was "indicative" of Singapore's multiracialism, and the Government's efforts to "look into the interests of minorities here".

A joint statement by the Singapore Chinese, Indian and Malay chambers of commerce and industry noted that "meritocracy and multiracialism are the two key cornerstones of Singapore's success". They added: "Social and racial stability is important to businesses and must be maintained. This allows businesses to plan ahead without worry, and adjust with ease."

So far, possible presidential candidates from the Malay community that have been floated include Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob, Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim, and former Speaker Abdullah Tarmugi.

Mdm Halimah did not respond to queries by press time while Dr Yaacob declined comment. Mr Abdullah, who is a member of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights, said it was still too early to speculate how the ongoing parliamentary debate on proposed changes to the Elected Presidency (EP) would end. "Also, I have not really given the matter any serious thought. It is therefore premature for me to make any statement on whether or not I'll be taking part in the coming EP election," he added.

Political analysts felt Mdm Halimah's credentials would make her a strong candidate.

Institute of Policy Studies deputy director (research) Gillian Koh described the fourth-term Member of Parliament as a lawyer who championed the cause of ordinary workers.

Agreeing, political observer Eugene Tan added: "As a double minority (Malay and a woman), she will be most closely watched as a possible candidate. Besides being a popular MP, her vast experience in the labour movement is another asset."

Associate Professor Tan, a Singapore Management University law don, also pointed to other possible candidates who may qualify under the discretionary track: Council of Presidential Advisers member Mr Po'ad Shaik Abu Bakar Mattar, and former Senior Minister of State (Foreign Affairs) Zainul Abidin Mohamed Rasheed.

Assoc Prof Tan said it appears the Government is "relatively confident that there are sufficient qualified Malay candidates who will step up to run in the presidential election". But he noted: "The more interesting question is whether a contest will materialise."

Pointing to the proposal to raise the criteria for candidates from the private sector — who must have helmed an entity with S\$500 million in shareholders' equity — Mr Alla'udin added: "There are a lot of good people, but there are not many who are CEOs of companies in that (bracket)."

Lianhe Zaobao has floated Bank of Singapore chief Bahren Shaari as a possible candidate.

Dr Koh said the window before the reserved election was long enough to "prepare and position" candidates, adding that it was the quality, not quantity, of candidates that mattered.

"(It's) not about the proportion of talent to the size or nature of the community but about persuading the two or three senior, outstanding people from the public or private sector to put themselves forward," she said. Meanwhile, two of the losing candidates from the 2011 presidential election also weighed in.

Mr Tan Jee Say, who got the second fewest votes in the four-corner fight, felt that diversity in the upcoming reserved election would be limited, as the possible candidates were mainly from the Establishment.

Mr Tan Kin Lian, the worst performer then, added: "My concern is that this is likely to produce a walkover and the people will not have the opportunity to elect a president through the voting process."

Dr Tan Cheng Bock, who lost narrowly to President Tony Tan, said he would comment after the parliamentary debate is over.