

MPs, analysts welcome proposal to safeguard minority representation

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Members of Parliament, political observers and minority community representatives yesterday welcomed the Constitutional Commission's proposal to safeguard minority representation in the Elected Presidency. They were, however, divided on whether a reserved election should be held at the next Presidential Election, (PE) which is due by August next year.

The commission has recommended that PEs be reserved for a particular minority race that has not been represented in the office for five consecutive terms. Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad reiterated that such a model should be seen as a safeguard, "not as an active clause to be (used) all the time". "What we are trying to do is to put certain safeguards (to ensure) that our Head of State has some level of representation (among the minorities)," he said. "If in an open election where Singaporeans elect a minority President, that would be great because it shows that we have arrived in terms of being race-blind and reaching a certain level of maturity."

He added that the question is whether the Government will invoke this mechanism for the PE next year or for future ones.

Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Darryl David noted that the proposed mechanism allows for "meritocracy and an open election". "There's nothing to stop certain ethnic groups from contesting in an open election. We might very well find someone in a minority group (to) become President," he said.

SIM Global Education political commentator Felix Tan felt it would be timely to reserve the next PE for Malay candidates, given that it was been a long time since Singapore had a Malay President. The Republic's only Malay President to date was also its first President after independence, Mr Yusof Ishak, who died in 1970 while still in office. "It's the next logical step," he said.

Singapore Indian Association president and retired diplomat K Kesavapany, however, felt that the Government should stave off from holding a closed election next year. "I don't think it should be started in 2017 to avoid any misapprehension that all these changes are being targeted at a particular person or are made with an objective in mind," he said, alluding to the fact that former People's Action Party MP Tan Cheng Bock, who lost in the 2011 PE, had earlier declared that he would make another bid for the office. Regardless whether the next PE will be reserved for a minority race, it is unlikely that Dr Tan Cheng Bock will qualify under the new eligibility criteria.

On the commission's suggestion that a closed presidential election for a particular race be held after five consecutive terms — which translates to three decades — without any representation in the office from that race, Institute of Policy Studies deputy director Gillian Koh said the duration was "long enough for voting attitudes to continue to change towards a situation where the merit of a candidate's work experience, his contribution to the national community ... and his or her multiracial outlook are what drives people to support that candidate". However, Iseas-Yusof Ishak Institute research fellow Norshahril Saat felt it was

too lengthy and should be shortened to three terms, instead. "I'm 33 now, and I'll only see a Malay President when I'm in my 60s," said Dr Norshahril, on the assumption that no Malay candidates win an open PE over the next 30 years or so.

The commission also recommended increasing the qualifying criteria for private-sector candidates who must now helm companies with S\$500 million in shareholders' equity, up from the existing requirement of S\$100 million in paid-up capital. Observers whom TODAY spoke to felt that more information should be provided on how the S\$500 million figure was derived. "It should be made clear that this is not to disallow anyone to run," said Mr Kesavapany. Mr Zaqy added that the Government should share estimated numbers of eligible candidates under the revised criteria.

Mr Tan Jee Say, who had contested unsuccessfully in the 2011 PE, slammed the recommendation, which would likely make him ineligible should he choose to run again. "Frankly if you want to update (the criteria), the reverse can also happen, so those who managed, let's say, S\$100 million last time should be equivalent to managing S\$500 million this time, so he should also qualify," he said, referring to the amount being adjusted for inflation.