

PAP's Janil Puthucheary on a non-Chinese PM: "Race continues to matter"

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He said that he hoped that as racial harmony progresses the decision will be made based on the person's ability to do the job right

"Race continues to matter", said Janil Puthucheary on Monday (Jan 25), during a panel discussing the issue of the Prime Minister's race.

Senior Minister of State (SMS) for the Ministry of Health (MOH) Dr Janil Puthucheary, Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) Hazel Poa and Workers' Party Member of Parliament (MP) Gerald Giam were some of the panellists at the 2021 edition of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) annual forum, Singapore Perspectives, titled "Politics in Singapore 2030".

The forum was moderated by Gillian Koh, Deputy Director (Research) and Senior Research Fellow at IPS, and she posed a question as to whether the Prime Minister's race mattered.

Dr Puthucheary said that "race continues to matter", even though he "wished that it were not so". His sentiments came in tandem with Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's suggestion in March 2019 that older Singaporeans are not ready for a non-Chinese PM.

"It will be up to the people of Singapore to decide, ultimately, about this matter," said Dr Puthucheary, who is from the ruling People's Action Party.

"And I do hope that our racial harmony progresses, to the point where, when people talk about a non-Chinese Prime Minister, it's not about an icon of resetting or an icon of reimagining, but on the basis of that person's ability to do the job right, and that will be for Singaporeans to decide", he said.

The other speakers at the forum, NCMP Ms Poa and WP MP Mr Giam disagreed with Dr Puthucheary.

Singapore is "already ready" for a non-Chinese prime minister, Ms Poa added.

However, the only reason why the country is not ready is that the ruling People's Action Party is not ready, she said.

Since gaining self-governance in 1959, Singapore's three PMs – the late Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong – have all been ethnic Chinese. Touted to be the next in line for the role, DPM Heng is also an ethnic Chinese.

In his comments, Mr Giam said that the WP had elected Leader of the Opposition (LOA) Pritam Singh, a non-Chinese as the party's secretary-general and that his election to the position is not the first time a non-Chinese has led the party as well.

Prior to Low Thia Kiang, the late J.B. Jeyaretnam had served as the party's leader for 30 years, from 1971 to 2001.