

## **A good president, of any race, will do for me**

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I am reading media reports on how those who appeared before the Constitutional Commission on the elected presidency agreed on the need for a minority president – and I think to myself: How can they not?

Whether you like it or not, having a minority president is a done deal. The question is how to achieve this. That's what the commission has been asked to do, not look into whether there is a need for one. The Prime Minister gave them a technical job to achieve a political aim for a non-political office: getting a minority into the post "periodically".

Hence, legal eagles including Chief Justice (CJ) Sundaresh Menon and Justice Tay Yong Kwang are on board to see how such a mechanism would fit into the legal and constitutional structure. So you have references to the special position of the Malays in the Constitution and discussions on whether "position" is equivalent to "privilege" or merely "protection".

And you have the former Speaker of Parliament Abdullah Tarmugi asking questions of contributors about tokenism, mandate, and legitimacy which a minority president who enters the job by a specially designed route would have.

How have we come to this turning back of the clock?

One of contributors, academic Loke Hoe Yong, said in his written submission to the commission:

"If I may point out, with the sincerest of intentions – if the Parliamentary Select Committee of 1990 had foreseen the lack of minority representation in the Elected Presidency to be an issue, and had addressed that in the constitutional amendments and the Presidential Elections Act of 1991, this Constitutional Commission might not have been necessary today."

The Parliament of those days had not seen race as an issue, but was focused on the need for checks and balances which a president with custodial powers would have. It did not foresee this despite the establishment of Group Representation Constituencies, which was premised on the assumption that Singaporeans are not race-blind. It followed the lead of the G: the second key concept. This time, Parliament is again following the lead of the G: we need a minority president.

The lament is that Singapore has not had a Malay president since the late Yusof Ishak. As for Mr S R Nathan, president between 1999 and 2011, the argument was that he might not have gotten the job, even with his heavy credentials, if he was pitted against a Chinese candidate in a popular vote.

But it didn't escape notice that at least one minority member had contested a single-seat ward in a general election – and won. He is Mr Michael Palmer. Now, the People's Action Party is fielding Mr Murali Pillai in the single-seat ward of Bukit Batok, a constituency with more than the usual proportion of Chinese residents, in the coming by-election.

Dr Mathew Mathews, a researcher who appeared before the panel yesterday, said that in a general election, the pull of a political party's brand name could be more important than an individual candidate's race to voters. There are fewer such mitigating factors in a presidential election. This means that some voters would have to resort to visual cues, race, and fall back on stereotypes. Face it, some voters will always fall back on race. The question is how many – especially since a whole generation has grown up in a common school system which emphasizes a national identity – since the EP concept was introduced. Just as people can look beyond race to the political party a candidate represents, can they not look at the merits of the presidential candidate instead of skin colour?

Said CJ Menon, who chairs the commission: "The real question is whether there is a concern that a minority president may be unelectable because of the reality of our racial mix in society and whether that's an acceptable state of affairs."

Is that the only real question though? Are we talking about the way we think voters vote – or are we talking about the paucity of minority candidates given the qualifying criteria? We're tip-toeing around the issue. So I am going to lay it out: Are we saying that there aren't enough eligible Malay presidential candidates?

Truth to tell, it is far easier to reel off names of leading lights in the Indian community, than in the much larger Malay community. In fact, Dr Mathews had this interesting point to make in his submission: A 2007 research report said that in the political sphere, Indians were consistently preferred over Malays for the top positions of MP, Prime Minister, and President.

Besides the team from Aware, who were more interested in getting female representation, none of the contributors suggested lowering the criteria for corporate types, now pegged at having at least three years of experience at the helm of a company, with a paid-up capital of \$100m. Former Nominated MP Eugene Tan, while asking for more stringent criteria, went so far as to say they should not be so stringent as to knock out minority candidates. He conceded later that he was talking about Malays.

As for public sector types, no one has done a count of how many minority members have held appointments which would qualify them for a job. Some numbers would advance the discussion rather than resorting to the old line about voters not being race-blind. And if there are really too few Malays for the job, then we have a bigger issue don't we? It would require more than tinkering with the Constitution.

We've been making a mental leap here, following the PM's lead that there must be a minority president at some time or another if there had not been one for a long time. But no one has really come to grips with the "why". Dr Mathews said in his submission: "I do not think that it is good for social cohesion and nation building if one of the constituent races had not been represented for some time."

But why? Is the worry that the Malay community will feel that it has been hard done by? Is it about presenting a non-Chinese face to the world from time to time? Does this tokenism, by whatever mechanism, burnish our multi-racial credentials? Because it is "tokenism".

Asked about this, Dr Mathews said that the perception would dissipate once the minority president discharges his duties with distinction. It seems to me a terrible burden to place on a president, who has to work harder to prove that he is worthy of the job.

CJ Menon yesterday let fall that a contributor had suggested that any provision to install a minority president should have a “natural sunset”. That is, it would not be invoked if Singapore progressed towards a race-blind society and elected a minority. I am waiting to hear more about this. In fact, can a minority candidate quickly step up to the plate in the coming presidential election due by August 2017?

I am concluding this with some quotes on what the late Mr S Rajaratnam told a university forum in June 1990. The man who wrote the Pledge said he had been asked his views on the next president after Mr Devan Nair left the post in 1985.

“After Devan Nair, we discussed the Presidency and they asked me, because I am a member of the minority, whether we should get a minority as President. I said, ‘Look, this is dangerous. You must have a good President. If you start with a President just because he is a representative of the minority, then we will be in trouble.’”

“So I nominated Wee Kim Wee. Because in my view he is a good man. But they were a bit taken aback. He is a Chinese. Well what’s wrong? What was Singapore’s first Chief Minister? A Jew.”

By the way, Mr Wee, president between 1985 and 1993, was also known as the People’s President.