

What's race got to do with being President? Part 2

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Did you know that there was nary a peep about race when Singapore was discussing the elected presidency proposal before it became law in 1991? We checked the Hansard.

Never mind that the system of rotating the previous presidents by race was already entrenched by then. No one wondered if a non-Chinese could make it as president if he or she had to go through the popular vote. What's even more strange: This was the time when the Group Representation Constituency to guarantee minority representation was discussed. No one, however, figured that the presidency would be in danger of being a Chinese-only post.

At this juncture, after 25 years, it's the key discussion point in the Constitutional Commission's first day of public hearing on changes to the presidency parameters.

Now, the usual justifications on the need to have a member of the minority community as President at some time or other are being trotted out. Because Singapore is a multi-racial society. Because he or she must symbolize unity among the races. Because Singaporeans are not race-blind.

What of Mr S R Nathan, who was president from 1999 to 2011? There was no electoral contest, noted Dr Mathew Mathews, who was among the seven asked to give his views. In the last PE, on the other hand, all four candidates were Chinese. His submission was in full support of the need for a mechanism to ensure minority representation. And he had back-up: He is the senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) who conducted two research projects on race, religion, language and ethnic relations. One of its findings: Out of 2,000 Chinese Respondents, about 18 per cent expressed that they are not comfortable with a Malay or Indian as an employer, as compared to only 7 per cent who were not comfortable with having a Malay or Indian colleague.

Dr Mathews thinks that two groups of minorities: Malays, and Indians and others, should be allowed to elect a candidate from their own communities if too much time had elapsed, say 24 to 30 years, since they had a representative.

To former Speaker of Parliament Abdullah Tarmugi's remarks that other surveys argue Singaporeans are race-blind, he said that though it might be so on paper, in reality, racial differences still exist for people. Racial harmony is due to careful management by the state, he said. "People go for socially acceptable answers... Beyond that we are not completely race blind", he added.

Mr Brian Chang and Mr Loke Hoe Yeong, both private individuals, suggested a tag-team ticket, much like the US presidency, where the Vice-President is elected together with the President as a running mate. Mr Loke went further to suggest that the vice-president also be Speaker of Parliament, which led commission members to ask if this would be a political post. The Speaker is now drawn from the ranks of elected Members of Parliament.

Nominated MP Eugene Tan thinks that a minority President is a good thing to have, but cautions against “engineering the outcome”. Confessing that he was being idealistic, he asked if skin colour is so important if a person could be accepted by all as being a symbol for unity, such as the late Mr Wee Kim Wee, a Peranakan who was known as the People’s president while he was in office from 1985 to 1993.

It is worth remembering the commission was not asked to look into whether there is a need for minorities to hold the post from time to time. It was asked to come up with a mechanism to make it happen.

Now the question is what would be a good way to do this while ensuring that the minority president retains a strong mandate, and that the system doesn’t smack of tokenism.

Prof Eugene Tan had suggested that one bar to cross was that the winning candidate, of whatever race, had to have obtained a minimum threshold of minority votes. This led Mr Abdullah to ask if this should apply even if the candidate was from a minority community. Here’s where it gets fuzzy. Does a non-Chinese candidate have to ensure he gets a minimum threshold of Chinese votes?

Another member of the commission, Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities chairman Chan Heng Chee simply asked how such votes could be ascertained if voting is secret. Colour-coding perhaps, answered Prof Tan.

There was an interesting lawyer-to-lawyer exchange between Prof Tan and High Court judge, Justice Tay Yong Kwang, who asked about closed elections for minority communities. Prof Tan wondered if this amounted to group rights, which is contrary to the principle of individual rights. But then again, said Justice Tay, there is Section 152 of the Constitution on the special position of the Malays, which allowed for Muslim law to govern the community.

You know, the discussion on race was so very polite that we thought we should cut to the chase here: Are there enough members of the minorities, especially Malays, who qualify for the presidency given the current criteria? Are there enough of them in big private sector companies and in the public sector? And if so, what’s preventing them from stepping forward? Do they themselves think they are un-electable because of their race?

Frankly, doesn’t the Constitutional Commission have the numbers? If not the private sector numbers, then it should at least be able to get the information from the G, given that there aren’t so many public sector appointments that would make it uncountable. That would be one way to bring the discussion forward.