

'Minority representation' major talking point

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AGAINST

CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS TO ENSURE MINORITY REPRESENTATION

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director, and Mr Tan Min-Wei, researcher, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)

A candidate's track record, instead of his or her race, should be considered during the Presidential Election, said Dr Koh, who thinks that there should not be any instituted safeguards in the Constitution to ensure minority representation.

Specifying that a certain ethnic minority should be president is against Singapore's multicultural ethos and meritocracy and it could be considered tokenism, she said.

Dr Koh suggested instead that outstanding individuals from minority ethnicities be persuaded by their community to make a presidential bid.

Mr Tan suggested that the process of applying to be a presidential candidate be made simpler so more minority candidates would consider running. He added that deposits for minority candidates could also be eliminated.

Ms Braema Mathi, president, and Mr Ngiam Shih Tung, member, human rights group Maruah

The group is against narrowing the criteria for president on both financial and racial grounds.

They also argued that narrowing the pool of candidates on racial grounds would increase the chance of a weak president being elected because of a lack of eligible candidates.

Ms Mathi also questioned the meaning of the term "minority" as Singapore society evolves.

Instead, she argued that it is just as important to ensure that minorities have a chance to rise through the ranks, instead of just ensuring that a member of the minority becomes the president.

Assistant law professor Jack Lee (right), Singapore Management University

Prof Lee suggested that instead of making changes to the Constitution, a select committee can be formed to identify and encourage suitable minority candidates to contest in the Presidential Election.

This would be similar to the Special Select Committee in the Nominated MP (NMP) scheme.

The committee appoints NMPs by asking for recommendations from business associations, civil society groups and unions.

Prof Lee also said that raising the eligibility criteria, in terms of raising the threshold for a candidate to have held office in a company with a paid-up capital of at least \$100 million, would make it difficult to find suitable minority candidates.

FOR

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Assistant law professors Jaclyn Neo and Jhaveri Swati, National University of Singapore

The law professors suggested that the one-person presidency be replaced with a three-member Council of Presidents. The Council should have at least two candidates of different ethnicities.

Asst Prof Neo said this system would result in an emphasis on multi-ethnicity, instead of simply minority representation.

The three members will take turns to be president for two years each. When one member is president, the other two members will be part of the Council of Presidential Advisers.

She also cited international research that indicated the tendency for people to vote along racial lines during a free election in ethnically divided societies, and this could result in disenfranchising the minorities.