

## **S'poreans to decide on whether the nation ready to have non-Chinese PM, two-party political system: Senior Minister Janil Puthucheary**

***Aldgra F.***

***The Online Citizen***, 25 January 2021

It will be up to Singaporeans to decide on whether the country is ready to have a non-Chinese Prime Minister and two-party political system, said Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information and Health Janil Puthucheary at an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) panel on Monday (25 January).

Dr Puthucheary was speaking in the IPS panel, entitled "Politics of Singapore 2030", which was also featuring Aljunied Member of Parliament (MP) Gerald Giam and Non-Constituency MP Hazel Poa.

The panel took place at Marina Bay Sands and was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh of IPS, as reported by Yahoo! News Singapore.

During the panel, an audience raised a question on the prospect of a non-Chinese Prime Minister, to which the Senior Minister replied: "It will be up to the people of Singapore to decide, ultimately, about this matter."

"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 continued.

Previously in March 2019, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said in a forum at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) that the older generation of Singaporeans is not ready to have a non-Chinese Prime Minister.

"Race continues to matter, and surveys done by IPS themselves suggests that that is so. So well, I think I would fully subscribe to the idea that I wish it were not so," Dr Puthucheary added.

Mr Giam pointed out that the Prime Minister is not directly elected by Singaporeans but instead was elected by a political party.

"So, it is really the decisions of the individual parties, whether they want to field a non-Chinese as the party leader, as a secretary-general," he said.

Citing the Workers' Party's (WP) current leader Pritam Singh, Mr Giam noted that the leader of the opposition is a non-Chinese and also not the first non-Chinese to hold the position.

He added that the WP's Aljunied team comprises three non-Chinese and two Chinese who "don't speak Chinese very well".

“If race and language was such an important factor for such an important constituency, we would have made sure that we field an all-Chinese slate, or at least four Chinese in the slate.

“But we made our calculations and therefore we chose that slate of candidates, regardless of race,” said Mr Giam.

Ms Poa, NCMP from the Progress Singapore Party (PSP), opined that Singapore is “already ready” for a non-Chinese Prime Minister.

She noted that the “only reason” that the country is not having a non-Chinese Prime Minister is because the ruling party People’s Action Party (PAP) is “not ready”.

### **Is S’pore ready for a two-party political system?**

Back in 2011, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong remarked that a two-party political system is “not workable” in Singapore due to “not enough top talent”.

In view of this, former Nominated MP Janice Koh questioned if the PAP remains with such a belief, to which Dr Puthucheary noted that it would be up to Singaporeans to decide.

He believes that it depends on how people make their vote and what are the proposals made by the political party.

“I don’t know that that there is or there isn’t [enough talent], but yet I would say, our job is to try and bring in as much of that talent as possible. And we should compete for that talent just as hard as anybody else,” said the PAP member.

Ms Koh also raised a question – directed to Mr Giam and Ms Poa – on the PAP’s argument that a two-party system could lead to more racial and religious divisions in Singapore, as well as ways to prevent this in the current political landscape.

In response, Mr Giam emphasised the need for every political party and candidate to make a conscious effort, act responsibly and in the interest of the country.

“I don’t think just having multiple parties is automatically going to make sure that everything balances out. There will be good parties, there will be bad parties, and the ultimate judge of this would be the people of Singapore,” he said.

Ms Poa, on the other hand, opined that a one-party system only worked in the past.

“But when we are faced with a climate where the choices are not so clear, the way forward is uncertain, then it is too risky to continue to rely on a one-party system. That is the same as putting all our eggs in one basket,” she noted.