

Politicians from PAP, WP and PSP debate non-Chinese PM issue at IPS forum

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- Parliamentarians representing three political parties spoke at an IPS conference, giving their views on Singapore's politics in the next decade
- PAP's Dr Janil Puthuchery said that whether Singapore is ready for a non-Chinese PM depends on the people, noting that recent surveys suggest that race still matters
- WP's Gerald Giam said it's a party's decision — the WP fielded three minority candidates in the Aljunied GRC and picked Mr Pritam Singh as leader
- Panellists also spoke about the growing tide of identity politics around the world and the responsibilities of the opposition after GE2020

Will Singapore be ready for a non-Chinese prime minister a decade from now? That depends on how people feel about race by then, Dr Janil Puthuchery, Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information and Health, said on Monday (Jan 25).

The hot button topic came up again during a panel discussion on politics by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), which featured three politicians from parties with parliamentary representation: The People's Action Party's (PAP) Janil Puthuchery, the Workers' Party's (WP) Gerald Giam, and the Progress Singapore Party's (PSP) Hazel Poa.

Asked by the moderator, IPS deputy director of research Gillian Koh, about how Singaporeans will feel about the issue 10 years from now, Dr Janil, who chairs non-profit organisation OnePeople.sg, said: "It will be up to the people of Singapore to decide, ultimately, about this matter.

"And I do hope that when our racial harmony progresses to the point where people talk about a non-Chinese PM, it is not about having an icon, but on the basis of that person's ability to do the job."

The panel delved into a wide range of topics, including the growing tide of identity politics around the world and the responsibilities of the opposition after the 2020 General Election (GE).

The event was the final conference of the think tank's four-day-long Singapore Perspectives conference and was held at the Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre.

While the panellists were in broad agreement on several topics, they did not agree on the matter of a non-Chinese prime minister.

Mr Giam, who is the Member of Parliament for the WP-held Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC), said: "From the conversations I've had with many other Chinese Singaporeans, I don't see any view expressed that suggests that they will not be ready for someone who is capable, honest, and is able to be a good leader, to be the prime minister."

He said it is up to the ruling party to choose its secretary-general, which depends on its own internal political calculations. In Singapore, the prime minister has always been the secretary-general of the winning party.

Mr Giam then said the WP had made that decision to pick a person of a minority race, Mr Pritam Singh, as its secretary-general in 2018, and saw “relative electoral success” in the 2020 GE. Three of the five MPs for Aljunied GRC were also from minority groups, he added.

Said the opposition MP: “If race and language was such an important factor for such an important constituency, we would have made sure that we fielded an all-Chinese slate, or at least four Chinese in the slate... But we made our calculations and we chose that slate of candidates, regardless of race.”

PSP’s Ms Poa, a Non-Constituency MP (NCMP), added: “We are already ready for a non-Chinese PM. The only reason why (Singapore) is not ready is because the PAP is not ready.”

Responding to a remark by an audience member who said that race should not matter in Singapore, Dr Janil said the reality is that it does and that the Government has been doing much to facilitate discourse about race.

“Race does matter... Surveys done by IPS have suggested so. I would fully subscribe to the idea that I wish it were not so,” said Dr Janil.

“At its heart, it is about trying to understand and intervene on something that is essentially a personal bias, a personal stereotype, which people don’t necessarily reveal or express adequately, but when aggregated across a population, has effects.”

IDENTITY POLITICS

The tricky issue of identity politics in Singapore is being discussed more openly and productively nowadays, however, and sensitive topics like race and religion have attracted diverse opinions, noted Dr Janil in his opening remarks.

Such discourse is happening in Singapore because people are seeing positive benefits of discussing their deep-seated prejudices, stereotypes and biases that they have worried about for several generations, he added.

But he noted that while other parts of the world are also talking about race and religion and have also seen progress in those areas, sensitive topics of race, identity and religion had also been “weaponised” for the purposes of political mobilisation.

Ms Poa said that the results of the recent GE show that people are ready to move past race, questioning the relevance of community self-help groups based on race, and a GRC system that guarantees minority representation.

Said the NCMP: “After more than 50 years of nation building, do we still need to classify ourselves along racial lines? We need to address issues head on in order to move forward and make progress, not get stuck in a rut.”

The topic came up again later in the IPS conference when diplomat and former PAP political office holder Zainul Abidin Rasheed, as a member of the audience, asked Education Minister Lawrence Wong, who spoke at a separate panel, about identity politics.

Racism still exists in Singapore and the nation’s multiracial and multicultural aspirations are still a work-in-progress, Mr Wong said in response.

That means that policies, such as the Housing and Development Board’s ethnic integration quotas and self-help groups, must be re-examined year after year to ensure a more united society, he said.

“We must do our very best to ensure that identity politics that is divisive and polarising never gets a chance to take root in Singapore — when that happens, it fuels the worst tendencies in people and breeds the hostility and division that we have seen in many other places,” said Mr Wong.

ACCOUNTABLE DEMOCRACY AND DIVISIVE POLITICS

The panellists from the three parties also spoke at length about an accountable democracy and the role of the opposition, with Mr Giam emphasising the importance of robust democratic institutions that “outlast any political party”.

Responding to a question from the moderator, Mr Giam said that democracy is not just about elections every five years, but also people’s participation.

“It also requires the government in power to be willing to listen and to accommodate different viewpoints, and to be able to accept that there would be differences, there would be opposition,” he said.

One audience member then asked whether a multi-party state would create divisions among Singaporeans. Another also quizzed the panellists about whether having an opposition, rather than a one-party state, would lead to a weak government.

Mr Giam said that each politician has to make a conscious effort to act responsibly and in the interest of the country, instead of acting for the parties or the individual’s self-interest.

“There will be good parties, there will be bad parties, and the ultimate judge of this would be the people of Singapore,” he said.

Agreeing, Dr Janil said that Singapore has a diversity of views not just in Parliament, but also in civil society organisations and community organisations that do not always align in their views.

“... as what has happened today in this forum, where you have competing views on the need for dominance in order to be effective in policy governance, versus creating space for multiparty views. Neither is absolutely correct,” he said.

Dr Janil added: “That's the key thing we have to hold on to (when) solving various thorny problems. It's not about having an absolutist view, or ideological view. We are in this together, and we are on the stage wanting the same thing.”