

No Election Needed: Singapore Installs First Female President

Jake Maxwell Watts; P.R. Venkat

The Wall Street Journal, 13 September 2017

The predominantly ethnic-Chinese city-state of Singapore will swear in its first minority Malay president in 47 years after strict new qualifying criteria, aimed at balanced racial representation, made the former speaker of Parliament and longtime member of the ruling party the only candidate.

Halimah Yacob, 63, will also be the first female holder of the largely ceremonial presidency of the Southeast Asian country of some 5.6 million. It would normally be decided by direct election, but that was canceled because she would have been the only one on the ballot.

The office of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who is the country's most powerful politician and leads the ruling People's Action Party, said Ms. Yacob will take the oath of office Thursday for a six-year term.

Her installation will conclude a contentious process after Parliament voted to change qualifying rules so that if one of Singapore's main ethnic groups--Chinese, Indians or Malays--isn't elected to the presidency in five consecutive terms, the next election is reserved for candidates of that group.

The rules also require candidates to have served in senior government office or as top executive of a profitable company averaging at least 500 million Singapore dollars (US\$371 million) in equity for three years.

These changes effectively reserved the election for a Malay candidate, barring other candidates including an ethnic Chinese, Tan Cheng Bock, a member of Singapore's parliament under the People's Action Party who has declared himself independent of the ruling party, which has been in power since independence in 1965. The last Malay president was Yusof Ishak, who left office in 1970.

Though widely liked, Ms. Yacob won in a process that "has been contentious from the day it has been first mooted," said Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Ms. Koh noted that only about 700 companies in Singapore were large enough to meet the qualification.

Bertha Henson, a writer for political blog The Middle Ground, said she was mad at the government for promoting affirmative action. The election "should be an open one to help disprove the notion that Singaporeans vote on the basis of skin color," she wrote.

Other comments on political blogs called the process a charade, a pretense at supporting minorities in a country where racial harmony is a specific government policy since racial riots in the 1960s. Ethnic Malay citizens, about 13% of the population, have tended to fare worse economically in the prosperous city-state than the Chinese majority.

But most Singaporeans have shown few signs of objecting. A survey in 2016 found that two-thirds approved of the changes to eligibility criteria.

Prime Minister Lee has argued that reserving the election for a Malay candidate would "safeguard to ensure that we regularly elect presidents from different ethnic groups." The government says its strict criteria will ensure fair representation and ensure that only qualified people can take the job.

In a speech Wednesday, Ms. Yacob said that she recognizes doubts about the process. "Although this is a reserved election, I am not a reserved president," she said. "I am a president for everyone regardless of race, language, religion or creed. I represent everyone."

While the president doesn't have executive authority, the office has certain veto powers over the use of foreign exchange reserves, government budgets and key appointments. The president draws an annual salary of S\$4.3 million.

Before becoming Speaker, Ms. Yacob served as a junior government minister and as deputy head of a confederation of trade unions.