

Political analysts caution against reverting to all-SMC system

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[Update on 25 Aug 2013: MARUAH clarified in follow-up comments to Yahoo! Singapore on Saturday that the emphasis in their proposal lay in their belief that ethnic-balancing provision would not need to kick in, and that minority candidates would be able to win parliamentary seats of their own accord.

"The balancing provision, we reiterate, is an insurance policy if and only if insufficient ethnic minority MPs are elected from normal SMC elections. Based on Singapore's history, this is unlikely to happen," said MARUAH president Braema Mathi.

All political parties will be required to field a minimum percentage of minority candidates in their national slates, she added, allowing voters in SMCs to evaluate candidates on their individual and party merits.

She also noted 12 instances where minority MPs from both the PAP and opposition parties winning in SMCs since 1980, maintaining also that the assertion of a broad segment of the public accepting the GRC system has yet to be tested in a national referendum.

Associate law professor Eugene Tan's idea of a two-member GRC was, however, lauded as a "step forward" from the status quo.

"We welcome this constructive contribution to the debate and hope to see Professor Tan's suggestion considered seriously as one avenue for improving the current GRC system," said Braema.]

Two political analysts have warned of the downsides to Singapore reverting to the previous system of electing one candidate per constituency, even as the majority of some 4,000 Yahoo! Singapore readers voted in favour of the move.

This comes after human rights activist group MARUAH on Monday presented a report recommending the removal of the current group representation constituency (GRC) system in which groups of candidates rather than individual candidates get elected as in the all-single member constituency (SMC) electoral system. Singapore's current electoral system involves a combination of GRCs and SMCs.

MARUAH suggested just having SMCs across the board and then having the "best losers" of candidates of ethnic minorities become full Members of Parliament (MPs) should not enough get elected.

Eugene Tan, assistant law professor of the Singapore Management University, and Gillian Koh, Institute of Policy Studies research fellow, both told Yahoo! Singapore they were not persuaded that the approach would work better in ensuring adequate ethnic minority representation in parliament than the way the GRC system currently does.

In Tan's view, in fact, the proposed alternative presents similar problems.

"The main difficulty I have with (MARUAH's plan) is that when the protective mechanism is triggered, the ethnic minority candidates elected would be seen as 'best losers' first," he said, noting that this would not help the cause of minority race MPs.

Tan further argued that making the "best losers" full MPs with all attendant rights and privileges adversely serves to undermine their legitimacy, weakening the link between them and their constituents since they do not represent them.

"To my mind, (MARUAH's plan) makes the ethnic minority candidates elected lack authenticity and authority as elected MPs. It would reinforce the impression or give rise to the perception that ethnic minority candidates are not electable," he said.

'Best loser' candidates cannot be full MPs

For Koh, the provision that allows the "best-loser" candidates to enter parliament with the same powers as duly-elected MPs does not hold water.

"(This scenario) cannot be the case," she said. "If they are best losers, they cannot have the same standing as duly-elected MPs (and) must have reduced powers, perhaps like NCMPs currently."

Koh echoed Tan's concern of MARUAH's proposed provision, adding that "their system will place even greater scrutiny on the ethnic balance, the percentage of MPs from the four main ethnic categories in Singapore, and yet without direct means by which minority communities feel they can influence things".

She said that the group has to convince the public and its leaders that Singapore's electorate does indeed look beyond ethnicity when voting people into parliament. "My sense is that a broad segment of the public accepts that the GRC system as one that balances quite a lot of considerations," said Koh.

She also voiced her appreciation of the "free-rider" effect that will be resolved in a reversion to an all-SMC system, however, noting that Singapore voters are concerned about and aware of this.

"This is definitely one area that the governing party has to pay greater attention to," she said, although she also pointed out that the expectation that the public has for their potential PAP MPs to have "earned their spurs on the ground" before being fielded does not apply to opposition candidates.

"There is less and less acceptance of having those without a clear record of public service or leadership being parachuted into the field by the PAP," she noted.

A two-member GRC system?

What would work, then? Tan suggests a two-member GRC system, where electoral wards that are not SMCs will elect two MPs — one from a specified ethnic minority group.

"Here, the ethnic minority candidate will have to pull his or her own weight to ensure that his running mate and him come out against the other two-person teams," he said. "It's like a mini-GRC but it makes 'free-riding' untenable. As such, the minority candidate elected will less likely bear the stigma of his riding on the coattails of his more illustrious team members. Such MPs will also not have to carry any stigma of being a 'best loser'."

Above all, Tan feels that voters must be fully appreciative of the need for sufficient minority representation in parliament, and correspondingly, parties and their candidates have to be seen and recognised as supporters of multiracialism.

Koh stressed the need for sensitivity to parties who prefer a more direct guarantee of representation in the course of debate on the issue.

"We can't be scolding them and asking them to be more enlightened. So tread carefully," she said.

MARUAH's calls for change, the group said, were fuelled by what it saw as the shortcomings of the GRC system—allowing the "free-rider" effect, as well as creating an unlevel playing field between the PAP and opposition parties, among other factors.