

## **It is up to Singaporeans to decide if we are ready for non-Chinese PM: Janil Puthuchery**

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It will be up to the people of Singapore to decide if the country can have a non-Chinese Prime Minister, said Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information and Health Janil Puthuchery on Monday (25 January).

He was responding to a question from the audience on the prospect of a non-Chinese Prime Minister, while participating in an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) panel entitled Politics in Singapore 2030, alongside Aljunied Member of Parliament Gerald Giam and Non-Constituency MP Hazel Poa. The panel was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh of IPS.

“It will be up to the people of Singapore to decide, ultimately, about this matter,” said Dr Puthuchery, who is from the ruling People’s Action Party. “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.”

Echoing Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, who had suggested in March 2019 that older Singaporeans are not ready for a non-Chinese PM, the 48-year-old added, “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.”

In response, Giam pointed out that unlike the president, the PM is not directly elected by Singaporeans, but 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 noted that the Workers’ Party’s current leader Pritam Singh is a non-Chinese, and not the first one either. Furthermore, its Aljunied team comprises three non-Chinese and two Chinese who “don’t speak Chinese very well,” he quipped.

“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.”

Poa, one of two Progress Singapore Party NCMPs, had a more succinct response for the SMS, “I think we are already ready for a non-Chinese Prime Minister, and the only reason we are not ready is, PAP is not ready.”

Since gaining self-governance in 1959, Singapore’s three PMs - the late Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Chok Tong and current incumbent Lee Hsien Loong - have all been ethnic Chinese. Heir apparent DPM Heng is also an ethnic Chinese.

**Two-party system**

Alluding to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's remarks in 2011 that a two-party system is not workable in Singapore as it does not have enough talent for two "A-teams", former Nominated MP Janice Koh asked Dr Puthuchery if the PAP still believes this is so.

The Pasir Ris-Punggol MP again responded by saying that this would be up to Singaporeans to decide. "I think it's about how people will vote and what are the proposals and offerings made by the party. And the people of Singapore will make that decision about what they want as that equilibrium."

He added, "I don't know 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."

Koh also asked Giam and Poa about the PAP's argument that a multi-party system could cause more racial and religious divisions in Singapore, and how this can be prevented in the current political landscape.

Giam responded that each political party and candidate has to make a conscious effort and to 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."

Poa also noted that a one-party system worked in the past, when the way forward was more clear cut.

"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."

The panel was part of Singapore Perspectives 2021, IPS's annual flagship conference, and took place at Marina Bay Sands.