

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

Elected Presidency: The Factor of Unintended Consequences

By Terri-Anne Teo

Synopsis

Singapore's Elected Presidency now includes institutionalised safeguards to ensure minority representation. This change recognises the importance for representation across races in a diverse society, but may instead exacerbate voting along racial lines.

Commentary

THE GOVERNMENT has accepted the Constitutional Commission's recommendation to reserve an election for candidates from a particular race if a member of that racial group has not been elected in the five terms prior.

The proposed changes, to be tabled in Parliament, seek to cultivate a society that recognises the value of cultural diversity and does not allow negative perceptions of difference to affect behaviour. Institutionalising this mentality through the elected presidency (EP) treats the recognition of racial differences as a civic principle that should be upheld across and within institutions of civil society. With this understanding, there are clear merits to safeguarding the representation of racial groups through the EP. With revisions set in motion, we should now consider measures needed to mitigate any self-fulfilling prophecy of voting along racial lines that could inadvertently emerge.

The Issue of Race

The release of the recommendations of the Constitutional Commission last month came just weeks after the results of a 2016 Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey commissioned by Channel NewsAsia (CNA) were published. The survey found that

Singaporeans are comfortable interacting with people from another race but have a strong preference for a prime minister or president from their own race.

Indeed, the commission noted public submissions on the subject, such as a contributor referring to a 2013 IPS survey showing a tendency to vote along racial lines. While hoping that the electorate will evolve towards a “race-blind” society, “where no safeguards are required to ensure that candidates from different ethnic groups are periodically elected” to the presidency, it acknowledged it would be “prudent” to put safeguards while “on the journey”.

Implicit within fears of race-based voting is that it reflects a form of racial thinking where members of a different race are perceived to be inherently different. Anthropologist Lawrence Hirschfeld states that “race is not a natural category of the mind... (but) race has in itself – in its psychological core – a naturalising and essentialising potency”. This effect of racial thinking is worrying because it could lead to a racially divided society. Ideally, the symbolism of changes to the EP system will dissolve this “potency” of race by alleviating racial divisions, helping to create an inclusive society.

This objective of symbolically portraying a representative society has raised doubt among pundits. They warn that race-based changes to the EP entail a form of tokenism, where individuals will be elected mainly on the basis of their representation of a particular racial group, rather than merit.

Self-fulfilling Prophecy?

In response to these concerns, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that the proposed change expresses “necessary symbolism of what we are as a multiracial society - what Singapore means, stands for and what we aspire to be”. Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Law K Shanmugam also explained, “the president represents the entire nation... If you accept that, then I think it’s only right that we have presidents from the different races at certain frequencies”. Assuring the electorate that meritocracy will be upheld, revisions to the EP include stricter criteria for eligible candidates.

With these measures, tokenism is clearly not the intent of the commission’s recommendations. What appears more important is whether the symbolism of the new race-based contest for elected presidency every five terms falls short of its objectives and leads to undesirable circumstances.

While recognising the potential for the EP to successfully nurture a racially representative society, the change risks fostering the very kind of race-based voting it was meant to compensate for.

Instituting an electoral mechanism founded on the very notion of race may reinforce the racial thinking that it is trying to avert, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Rather than discouraging voting along racial lines, the electorate may be spurred to continue – or begin - voting for members of their racial group with the rationale that

opportunities for a member of the minority group are now built into the system as a safeguard mechanism.

Consequently, the introduction of a five-term policy could result a vicious cycle where members of various minority groups are only elected every sixth term.

Mitigating the Racial Pitfall

To mitigate this pitfall, existing shifts away from racial thinking should be nurtured. While the IPS survey suggests that there is a tendency towards race-based voting in Singapore, this projected trend may not be as ominous as it appears. Public dialogues around the subject of the EP illustrate an increasingly reflexive electorate who question the relevance of racialised categories.

In addition, the IPS survey shows that voting preferences of the younger generation are less influenced by race as compared to preceding generations. These observations demonstrate movements towards a more evolved, multicultural society. Rather than allowing these conversations to stagnate, there should be efforts to harness and encourage constructive discourses about race of the sort that emerged during debates about the EP. Only by fostering representative dialogue and autonomous expressions of identity as social norms will we be able to justifiably move beyond the need for instituted safeguards.

The introduction of race-sensitive changes to the EP signifies a move towards a more open and representative society. But it is necessary to identify the potential risks, such as divisive forms of racial thinking, while keeping its merits in view.

Terri-Anne Teo is a Research Fellow with the Social Resilience Programme at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. This appeared earlier in The Straits Times.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg