Tharman is president-elect. Is Singapore a post-race society?

His presidency is a chance to shape race relations positively. Singapore still has some way to go.

President-elect Tharman Shanmugaratnam's appointment as Singapore's next president marks a major step forward in the nation's commitment to racial harmony. Mr Tharman's resounding victory, with 74.9 per cent of the vote, underlines the aspiration shared by many Singaporeans to elect a competent and qualified president — whether from the dominant Malay, Chinese or Indian communities, or all three (through an open contest in line with the nation's commitment to meritocracy).

Race was almost a non-factor at the ballot box in some sense. Mr Tharman's impeccable credentials, coupled with his popularity over two decades in politics, overcome any lingering racial prejudices.

Racial Representation in the Presidency

Having good racial representation in the presidency is important for the development of multiculturalism in Singapore. Recognising this, Parliament constantly appoints presidents from all the main racial groups in Singapore since Ms Yusof Ishak first served the role, even though there was no constitutional requirement to do so.

However, the public was unmoved by this objective only after constitutional amendments were passed in 2006 to reserve the elected presidency for candidates of a particular racial group if there had not been a president from that group for the five most recent terms.

The population has largely come to accept these interventions as necessary to uphold the multicultural character of the presidency. In the 2011 CNR/IPS survey on Race Relations, over 70 per cent of the 2,000 Singaporeans surveyed believed that the reserved presidency helped preserve racial harmony. The social mix of a president has long been a core concern in Singapore.

Seeing a minority candidate win the race was not a given. The 2011 Presidential Election, featuring four candidates from the majority race, illustrated the growing challenges facing any qualified minority candidate in the race for the top job.

With qualifying conditions subsequently tightened, the very high bar for a nomination meant that only a small number of minority community representatives would be eligible to contest the presidency. This could be concerning if their channels of getting elected might be adversely impacted by the potential influence of racial preferences.

The High Water Mark of Race Religiosity

While Mr Tharman's victory represents a significant milestone, it is no means signals that Singapore has fully transcended racial divisions and become a post-race society.

Race is unlikely to lose its significance entirely after Mr Tharman's assumption of the presidency, just as it did not lose its significance entirely after the United States elected a black president.

Many observers have remarked on the irony that the mountain top of two relations in the US coincided with Mr Obama's inauguration as the first African-American president, only to steadily deteriorate in the valleys through his tenure with heightening racial tensions, a sense of irrelevance among a largechunk of the population and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Singapore has been fortunate in maintaining generally positive race relations due to a combination of state interventions and the resolve of the population. Yet, racial preferences undoubtedly persist within the population, as shown in the most recent CNR/IPS survey. The survey showed high levels of racial sentiments for various races, particularly among Chinese respondents.

When asked about the acceptability of different races to manage their business, nearly all were accepting of an ethnic Chinese in that role, although only about half were accepting of an East Indian (32.6 per cent) or Indian (23.9 per cent). Similar trends were evident when respondents were asked about renting a property to people of different racial groups or having someone from another race marry into the family.

It would be overly simplistic to attribute these racial preferences, and the general predisposition to see one another in terms of race, to state policies, such as the race-conscious policies introduced by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's government to bridge potential gaps with demographic groups that might have traditionally been akin to an Indian candidate. His campaign slogan, " Respect for All, and the use of the auspicious pineapple symbol were apt choices, resonating with Singapore's culturally diverse population.

Towards a More Racially Harmonious Society

While a post-racial Singapore may not be within immediate grasp despite President-elect Tharman's successful election, his victory can further Singapore's development into a more racially harmonious society.

The same CNR/IPS survey showed that since the reserved presidency in 2001, which saw Masagos Zulkifli Yatim assume the role, the population has become more at ease with a Malay president, particularly among Chinese respondents. In 2016, 57.3 per cent of Chinese respondents, based on an expanded sample, would accept a Malay president. This increased to 79.4 per cent in 2018.

Segments of the population, which may have been more wary before the reserved presidency was instated, were won over by President Halimah Yacob's performance in office, which may have dispelled any remaining paradoxes in a multi-racial society. In this context, it will be interesting to see how Singaporeans would rate a Malay president for the role of president.

Structures Preserving Racial Harmony Still Needed

Still, it will be naïve to think that Mr Tharman's win is a strong enough justification that the structures that maintain racial harmony, particularly the government's promotion of racial representation of minorities in politics through the group representation constituencies (GPC) will not be preserved.

Opponents of the GIC system claim that racial minorities can have their say in elections in single-member constituencies on social media and instant messaging apps. These included comments which alleged that the majority Chinese population needed a Chinese president to represent them after years of having a non-Chinese president, with Tharman the champion of the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, or Ceca, a new, dynamic way of highlighting the presence of non-resident Indians working in Singapore and attacks on the Japanese ancestry of Tharman's wife.

It is no secret where some of these comments originated from, or whether they were propagated by foreign actors seeking to sow discord or hatched locally. Yet, the more that they were shared around, often without any criticism, underscores that these messages had traction with at least some Singaporeans.

Recognising that race is never absent in elections, Mr Tharman's campaign to bring potential gaps with demographic groups that might have been traditionally akin to an Indian candidate also resonated with Singaporeans. His campaign slogan, "Respect for All, and the use of the auspicious pineapple symbol were apt choices, resonating with Singapore's culturally diverse population.

Mathew Mathews

The election of Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam as Singapore’s next president marks a major step forward in the nation’s commitment to racial harmony. Mr Tharman’s resounding victory, with 74.9 per cent of the vote, underlines the aspiration shared by many Singaporeans to elect a competent and qualified president — whether from the dominant Malay, Chinese or Indian communities, or all three (through an open contest in line with the nation’s commitment to meritocracy).

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However, the public was unmoved by this objective only after constitutional amendments were passed in 2006 to reserve the elected presidency for candidates of a particular racial group if there had not been a president from that group for the five most recent terms.

The population has largely come to accept these interventions as necessary to uphold the multicultural character of the presidency. In the 2011 CNR/IPS survey on Race Relations, over 70 per cent of the 2,000 Singaporeans surveyed believed that the reserved presidency helped preserve racial harmony. The social mix of a president has long been a core concern in Singapore.

Seeing a minority candidate win the race was not a given. The 2011 Presidential Election, featuring four candidates from the majority race, illustrated the growing challenges facing any qualified minority candidate in the race for the top job.

With qualifying conditions subsequently tightened, the very high bar for a nomination meant that only a small number of minority community representatives would be eligible to contest the presidency. This could be concerning if their channels of getting elected might be adversely impacted by the potential influence of racial preferences.

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Race is unlikely to lose its significance entirely after Mr Tharman’s assumption of the presidency, just as it did not lose its significance entirely after the United States elected a black president. Others systems and the United States will continue to have race-conscious policies introduced by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s government to bridge potential gaps with demographic groups that might have traditionally been akin to an Indian candidate. His campaign slogan, “Respect for All, and the use of the auspicious pineapple symbol were apt choices, resonating with Singapore’s culturally diverse population.

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Tharman’s win a pivotal chapter in ongoing narrative

FROM B1

But this argument fails to recognise that Mr Tharman’s popularity today was possible only because he entered Parliament, and through the GRC system back in 2001.

There is insufficient evidence to suggest that racial preferences no longer matter in political contests to the situation where the lack of a mechanism to ensure racial representation in Parliament may result in one ethnic minority group being disproportionately under-represented in Parliament. This would have serious consequences for Singapore’s racial harmony.

Hopefully, the fact that Mr Tharman was endorsed by 70.4 per cent of Singaporeans will help those still harbouring doubts about the suitability of ethnic minorities for top positions to reconsider their stance. People should be evaluated based on the unique talents they bring rather than their ethnic origins.

Singapore’s journey towards racial harmony continues, and Mr Tharman’s victory is a pivotal chapter in that ongoing narrative. Mr Tharman himself best articulated this in saying: “With each half decade, Singapore is changing and evolving. I hope that my being elected president is seen as another milestone in that process of evolution.”

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