

GRC system and politics of inclusion

Is Singapore society ready for "post-racial" politics, where voters will send in enough MPs of different races to Parliament, doing away with the need for Group Representation Constituencies?

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Civil society organisation Maruah last week proposed a reform of a central part of Singapore's electoral system - the Group Representation Constituency introduced in 1988.

Under the GRC system, candidates contest an election in a team of between three and six members, with at least one from a minority community.

The primary virtues of the system bear repeating: the multiracial slate for GRCs guarantees a minimum number of seats for minority MPs, while the need to get political support from all races imposes discipline on political parties to pursue a multiracial brand of politics.

The problems as cited by Maruah: it creates a barrier to entry for smaller political parties to contest in the general elections as they may be hard-pressed to field a quality team; it allows for the "free-riding of untested candidates" who get in on the back of stronger team members; and it "entrenches the expectation of ethnic voting".

In fact, some of these shortcomings were acknowledged by the Government. In May 2009, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong pledged to make the electoral system more "balanced". He pledged to reduce the average size of GRCs from 5.4 to five MPs, a small step in making GRCs more accurately reflect the demographics. The minimum number of Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) was also raised from nine to 12.

Four years after that balancing, it is only to be expected that concerned Singaporeans ask if a major overhaul of the GRC system is due. Maruah's raising of this issue is thus welcome. However, its proposal appears to be rooted in the belief that most citizens do and will look beyond ethnicity in choosing their political representatives - which in my view is a questionable one.

It proposes that the electoral system revert to one comprising only SMCs, and that political parties be regulated to provide a percentage of minority candidates. If not enough multiracial candidates are voted in, a group of minority "best losers" can be invited to take seats in Parliament with the full powers of elected members.

It asks for in-depth studies of citizens' views on whether Singaporeans are "post-racial" in their electoral behaviour to properly assess the proposal.

It will be difficult to use attitudinal surveys to gauge whether Singaporeans vote for candidates on the basis of race. Too many different factors shape how people vote, especially in the heat of the hustings.

Two post-election surveys conducted by the policy think-tank Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), while not definitive, are indicative in suggesting that ethnic background does not make a difference in political attitudes.

Conducted after the 2006 and 2011 general elections, these surveys found that the differences in views on what issues mattered to respondents, what they looked for in their political representatives and what they thought of the political system were more likely to be tied to their differences in age and socio-economic class. The GRC system was in place when the surveys were taken, suggesting that it has muted the ethnic slant to issues in a general election.

A better indication would be another survey this year by IPS and racial harmony group OnePeople.sg, titled Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony (2013), that found that while Singaporeans do value the ideal of multiracialism, interest in intercultural understanding and the actual level of cross-racial friendships were found to be low.

This finding does not suggest a strong basis for a sense of empathy for the community-based concerns of people not like oneself. Nor do they augur well for the development of a sense of commonality that quashes all differences.

Government leaders are often asked to assuage the concerns of sections of the minority communities. The latter want definitive representation of their interests. Time and time again, we are reminded that such political constituencies exist - such as over concern about the weightage of mother tongue languages in the PSLE, or unhappiness over the use of Mandarin and not other vernacular languages in public transport announcements.

Maruah has the challenge of convincing the public that Singapore society is post-racial and ready for an electoral system without GRCs.

However, its suggestion of settling for "best losers" if minority candidates aren't elected in sufficient numbers is a problematic one. Can these "best loser" minority representatives who could not win enough support at the polls have the standing needed to play leadership roles in the community or be effective advocates on issues that broad political majorities might overlook?

Maruah's proposed system will bring to the fore the issue of proper racial distribution of MPs in Parliament by race - but without a practical, direct solution by which minority communities feel they can influence the outcome of elections or policymaking.

For all its shortcomings, the GRC system allows voters in a region to scrutinise candidates of all ethnicities, including the minority candidate as required by the Elections Department. It provides comfort to voters that most of their concerns can be represented, and in an integrated manner, before the election. The choice is then made among different multiracial slates.

In contrast, under Maruah's SMC system, if Singapore is not yet a fully multiracial or " post-racial society", minority voters would be put in a difficult position, wanting political representation but wondering if voters of other races would be enlightened enough to vote for enough minority candidates to adequately address minority community concerns in Parliament.

The GRC system entrenches such representation.

As for "free-rider" issues, to be sure, weaker candidates do get elected on the coat-tails of strong political leaders. The PAP has made use of this in past elections to bring in new blood, so there is a tendency to think that this advantages the incumbent PAP.

In fact, the winner-takes-all effect of GRC also advantages the opposition, as it can knock out an entire team of PAP candidates in one constituency: as it did in Aljunied GRC in 2011, when the Workers' Party dislodged the PAP slate consisting of three political office-holders and one newbie touted as a future minister.

A simpler suggestion for GRC reform is to cut the average size of GRCs to between three and four as it was in 1988. The minimum requirement of one minority candidate and system of allocation should remain. GRCs will then better reflect the numerical distribution of minorities in the citizen population today. It will also not distort the power of the vote to such an extent that one vote can send six members to Parliament.

Maruah has started the ball rolling on this important debate that at its heart is about "political inclusion". However, as we discuss the issue of race and politics, we must be sensitive to those who do prefer the guarantee of minority representation to be more direct and within their control.

We should not castigate and fault others for not being "more enlightened" to look beyond race and ethnicity. When it comes to race and identity and politics, it is better to tread carefully, be realistic and practical in suggesting solutions and to be inclusive in the conversation.

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