It was much disappointment that I read in the newspapers of the need for Group Representation Constituencies (GRC) to ensure that minority and women candidates are elected into Singapore’s Parliament.

The reason for the GRC? Well, Singaporean voters apparently prefer Chinese and male candidates to become their Members of Parliament.

Perhaps it is idealism but I believe that with Singapore’s emphasis and commitment to the multiracial ethos and meritocracy, Singaporeans will vote into office the best person to be their representative in Parliament.

Regardless of race, language, religion, or gender.

But this does not appear to be so according to Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

The GRC was first introduced in the 1988 general elections as a commitment to multiracialism. It was created, declares Article 39A(1) of the Singapore Constitution, “to ensure the representation in Parliament of Members from the Malay, Indian and other minority communities.”

The argument (then and now) is that the GRC system ensures that the minority races’ needs, concerns, and views are not ignored or neglected in an ethnically Chinese-dominant Singapore.

I cannot agree more with such a noble constitutional intent. Racial and religious harmony is a cornerstone of Singapore’s transformation from a colonial outpost to a modern city-state.

Four general elections on, Singaporeans apparently still vote along racial lines. It now appears that Singaporeans also vote adopt a gender-biased stance preferring male candidates.

If such trends are indeed true and reflective of Singapore’s electorate, I am concerned with the persistence of such trends. All Singaporeans should be too.

Yet I wonder if the GRC scheme, an innovative attempt at constitutional engineering, has made Singaporeans complacent in our commitment to genuine multiracialism. The GRC has achieved, albeit mechanistically, a balanced multiracial representation in Singapore’s Parliament.

But it seems that the GRC scheme has lulled us into a false sense of security with regards to our attitudes towards the minority races and women.

The GRC scheme has not advanced adequately the urgency and commitment to the development of norms and values that would be truly supportive of the need for a multiracial legislature and an abiding commitment to multiracialism.

The GRC is now also the desired vehicle for political parties to have women candidates elected into Parliament. To the best of my knowledge, this was never asserted prior to this general election.

I suppose the least desirable combination for any parliamentary candidate in Singapore is to be a non-Chinese woman.

Should we continue voting along racial (and gender lines), the GRC system may ultimately lose its credibility because it may well be perceived, by the dominant ethnic Chinese and the minority races alike, as a political crutch of sorts for the minorities (and women).
However, the GRC system was never designed to ensure gender representation. To use the GRC to ensure women are elected as MPs would be diluting the constitutional intent of the GRC.

The Singapore government has stated that Singaporean voters are mature and committed to multiracialism. If so, why the apparent tendency to vote along racial and gender lines?

We need to urgently address the persistence of this biased attitude towards the minorities and women. Such attitudes are detrimental to the well-being of Singaporeans and the type of society we want.

For Singapore to be truly a first world society, we urgently need to reflect on our worrying voting tendencies.

If we truly aspire to be an oasis of harmony and progress, we need to ensure that our excellent hardware is matched by a “heartware” that is non-discriminatory and which is conducive to the aspirations of our minorities and women.

Sure, it may be an innate tendency of humans to prefer someone of their kind. But Singapore has always prided itself as exceptional, progressive, meritocratic, and multiracial.

And, for Singapore, we cannot afford not to be inclusive towards a significant segment of our citizenry.

And we have prospered because we have stayed the course in our commitment to multiracialism and in providing equal opportunities to our women.

The electoral process presents an ideal opportunity to educate the electorate and entrench multiracialism. Voter preferences and values can be constructively shaped by the electoral system.

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) can and should exercise the much needed moral leadership to counter such dangerous voting patterns.

The PAP has fielded minority candidates in single member constituencies in the past and those candidates have won. It should resolutely re-orientate the electorate’s supposed preference for Chinese male candidates.

By taking the initiative and given its political cachet and hegemony the PAP can catalyze the entrenching of multiracialism and gender equity. The other political parties will have to follow suit or else they will be marginalized by the electorate.

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