IS IT true that the typical Singaporean voter prefers his or her Member of Parliament to be a Chinese male?

With Singapore's emphasis and commitment to the multiracial ethos and meritocracy, it is logical to expect that Singaporeans will vote into office, regardless of race or gender, the best person to be their representative in Parliament.

IS IT true that the typical Singaporean race or gender, the best person to be their representative in Parliament?

According to Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, male Chinese electoral candidates are the ones who will best stand the ground given the voting preferences of the electorate.

Therefore, the group representation constituency (GRC) system is needed. MM Lee argues, to ensure not only that minorities, but also women, are elected into Parliament in sufficient numbers.

Translated into real terms, one could argue then that the least desirable attribute for any parliamentary candidate in Singapore is to be a non-Chinese female. Indeed, one has to go back to September 1965 to find the last non-Chinese female elected as MP in a single-seat.

The GRC was, of course, first introduced in the 1988 General Election (GE) as a steadfast manifestation of multiracialism. Its aim, declares the Singapore Constitution, is to ensure the representation in Parliament of minorities from the Malay, Indian and other minority communities.

Five general elections on, the PAP Government appears to believe that Singaporeans are still voting along racial lines. And it now seems that women remain in danger of becoming a minority in the political context, requiring the GRC system to be used to ensure their representation. (Singapore's Parliament was an all-male stronghold between 1972 and 1984).

If such trends are indeed true and reflective of Singapore's electorate and their political attitudes, then we shall all be truly concerned. A First World country needs not only a First World government and opposition, but also a First World civil society and electorate where meritocracy, equality andgressiveness are hallmark.

Consider the following facts:

One, all women MPs (all from the PAP) were elected through the GRCs in the 1997, 2001 and 2006 GE.

Two, the last time the PAP fielded a woman candidate in a single-member constituency (SMC) was the 1991 GE.

Three, since the 2001 GE, electoral contests to SMCs have been the preserve of Chinese male candidates (PAP) and the opposition alike.

Four, except for Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, who won Yuhua SMC in the 1991 GE, all single-seat MPs since then have been Chinese males.

Five, all minority MPs (all from the PAP) have been elected on GRC tickets since the 1991 GE, with Mr Abdullah Tanmgui and Mr S. Dhanabalan being the last minority SMC MPs elected in 1988.

Do the above facts show that Singaporeans are voting along racial and gender lines?

I would argue that the evidence is, in fact, not conclusive. If anything, it merely shows that the PAP and the opposition have refrained from fielding female and minority candidates in the SMCs and, instead, opted for the GRCs. It may well be an unfounded perception that Singaporeans vote along racial and gender lines.

In fact, the persistent practice of fielding minority and women candidates in GRCs may inadvertently perpetuate the very attitudes the GRC was meant to combat: namely, bias against minorities and women.

If Singaporeans continue voting along racial lines and with gender preference, the electoral system may ultimately lose its credibility and legitimacy because it would be perceived as providing a political crutch of sorts for the minorities and women.

Worse, they would not be regarded as having been elected on their own terms.

Singaporeans need to work together to mould the attitudes and value systems held by our political parties and the electorate, to prevent an entrenchment of bias against minorities.

While an electoral system is not meant to be a panacea for a country's political deficiencies, the electoral system and process should be conceived and embolden as a pathway to the norms and values that we hold dear and aspire towards.

The ruling People's Action Party can and should, exercise the much needed moral leadership and soft power to counter such supposed biased voting tendencies.

It should strive to resolutely nudge and re-orientate the electorate's supposed preference for Chinese male candidates.

The PAP has fielded minority candidates in single-member constituencies in the past and those candidates have won handomely.

One can recall some precedents of its minority and/or female candidates triarking over Chinese and/or male candidates: Mr Dhanabalan, Mr S. Rajaratnam, Mrs Yu-Foo, Dr Dina Tan and Dr Aline Wong.

They demonstrate vividly that Singaporeans are not as racially or gender-biased as is usually perceived as mainstream political discourse.

The PAP can reaffirm its pathfinder role in its commitment to the equality of women in Singapore — it passed the Women's Charter in 1961 as a commitment to gender equality.

For a start, it should build on the fact that there will be 17 female MPs in the 11th Parliament, compared to 10 female MPs in the last Parliament.

For future elections, the PAP should be bold enough to field suitable female candidates in SMCs. And, in the fullness of time, have female MPs in GRCs.

That some vanguard zeal should likewise be emulated in the fielding of minority candidates.

Otherwise, unchanged electoral behaviour by parties and the electorate may unintentinally erode our fundamental commitment to multiracialism, equality and meritocracy.

Ultimately, the main antidote to this is the political will political parties and the electorate can muster in wanting to stay this perception or practice of racial and gender bias in elections.

By taking the initiative and leveraging on its political cachet and hegemony, the PAP can catalyse the entrenching of multiracialism and gender equality over and beyond the political sphere.

It will trigger a cascading effect and the other political parties will have to follow suit or risk being perceived as pandering too much to majority concerns and ignoring minority communities.

Besides, the minorities and women are two substantial niche vote-banks for political parties to capture through their sincere embracing of egalitarianism.

As the memories of the 2006 GE start to fade, it is timely for the Singaporean electorate, the political parties and their supporters to reflect on our hopes, aspirations and critique of our political values.

And the freezing of our minds from the gridlock of race and gender remains a work in progress that we should not shy away from.