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Minister: Older generation of Singaporeans not ready for non-Chinese PM

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Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat noted that while many among the young were happy to have a prime minister who is not Chinese, he said that this was not the case for all of Singapore. — TODAY pic

SINGAPORE, March 29 — A segment of Singapore's population is happy to have an individual from a minority race as their prime minister, but the older generation is not ready for that.

Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat, who is expected to succeed Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, said this during a forum at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) yesterday. He was replying a question posed by a member of the audience, who noted that Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam was a popular choice to take on the top job.

In asking the question, Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt Abdullah of NTU's School of Social Sciences' public policy and global affairs programme, also pointed out that Tharman's popularity was evident in his constituency's elections results.

A survey conducted by market research consultancy Blackbox in 2016 found that Tharman was the top choice among Singaporeans to succeed Lee, with 69 per cent of almost 900 respondents indicating that they would support him to be the candidate for prime minister.

"Is it Singapore who is not ready for a non-Chinese prime minister, or is it the PAP (the ruling People's Action Party) who is not ready for a non-Chinese prime minister?" Walid asked.

While Heng noted that many among the 700 students who attended the ministerial forum organised by the NTU Students' Union were happy to have a prime minister who is not Chinese, he said that this was not the case for all of Singapore.

He also noted that it was a good sign that young people today seem “quite comfortable” with having a non-Chinese prime minister as it showed that the government’s emphasis on standing united as one people “regardless of race, language or religion” had borne fruit.

Walid also asked if the government was sending out contradictory messages by reserving the 2017 Presidential Election for candidates from the Malay community while stating that Singapore is not ready for a prime minister from a minority race.

Heng stressed that it was “not contradictory”. “It is precisely because we need to place this emphasis institutionally that we recognise that we have not arrived. It is important for us to ensure that we have that safeguard.”

Pointing to what he witnessed when he took part in elections as “an observer” and not a candidate, he added: “I can tell you that it is not easy because it triggers all the feelings about race, which are not obvious. But when it comes to an election, it becomes an issue.”

At yesterday’s forum, Heng was also asked a range of questions across different topics, including the future of jobs and Singapore’s foreign policy.

An accountancy student asked if Singapore would follow the path indicated by the 2013 Population White Paper, which projected a population of up to 6.9 million here by 2030.

Heng said Singaporeans understand that rationally, the country needs more people as its workforce is declining, but “emotionally, we don’t feel comfortable”.

He also noted that openness and multiculturalism are important aspects to why Singapore is commemorating this year the 200th anniversary of the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles.

“The more open we are, the more international we are in our outlook, the better it is for Singapore (and) the world. Because you don’t want a world where people build walls around themselves,” Heng added. — TODAY