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**NAVIGATING MINORITY INCLUSION AND PERMANENT DIVISION:  
MINORITIES AND THE DEPOLITICIZATION OF ETHNIC DIFFERENCE\***

**INTRODUCTION**

**A**dapting the majority principle in electoral systems for the accommodation of political minorities is a crucial endeavour if one desires to prevent the permanent disenfranchisement of those minorities. Such permanent exclusion undermines the maintenance and consolidation of democracy as there is a risk that this could lead to political upheaval should the political minorities start to see the system as oppressive and eventually revolt against it. These risks are particularly elevated in the case of majoritarian systems, e.g. those relying on simple plurality where the winner is the candidate supported by only a relative majority, *i.e.* having the highest number of votes compared to other candidates<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, such a system, while formally equal, could however be considered substantively unequal since formal equality often fails to recognize the especial vulnerabilities of minority groups and therefore can obscure the need to find solutions to address those vulnerabilities.

Intervention in strict majoritarian systems is thus sometimes deemed necessary to preserve effective participation of minorities in political life to ensure a more robust democracy. Such intervention has been considered especially important in societies characterized by cleavages such as race/ethnicity, religion, language, and culture, where there is a need to ensure that minority groups are not permanently excluded from the political process. This could occur when their voting choices almost never produce the outcomes they desire or when, as candidates, they almost never receive the sufficient threshold of support to win elections. In this paper, I focus on ethnic minorities as one political minority that has led to the need to adapt the majority rule. Here I use ethnicity broadly to include race, which is the term that is still used in many places, including Singapore which is my primary example for discussion here. In countries where ethnicity is an important basis for group distinction, it has been observed that political choices could and are not infrequently influenced by the candidates' ethnicity<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> J.M. COLOMER, *Electoral systems, Majority rule, Multiparty Systems in International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, William A. Darity Jr. (ed.), Detroit, Macmillan Reference USA, 2nd ed., 2008.

<sup>2</sup> There are empirical studies that suggest that ethnicity is a relevant factor in voters' choices, although the impact varies according to the various ethnic makeup and other historical-cultural factors. See e.g. D. CHONG & J. JUNN, « Politics from the Perspective of Minority Populations », in J.N. DRUCKMAN *e. a.* (dir.), *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Polit-*

Ethnic-based voting would result in ethnic minorities being permanently excluded from electoral bodies in societies where there is a clear majority group<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, a range of different approaches have been proposed and adopted to modify such majoritarian, “winner-take-all” systems in ethnically diverse societies to make them more inclusive<sup>4</sup>. These can broadly be differentiated into consociational, centripetalist<sup>5</sup>, and communalist models.

Consociationalism relies on grand coalitions among political elites to ensure inter-ethnic power sharing<sup>6</sup>. Specific institutional measures that have been characterised as consociationalist include grand coalition cabinets, proportional representation (PR) elections, minority veto powers and communal autonomy<sup>7</sup>. The main premise of these measures is to « collectively maximise the independence and influence of each main ethnic community<sup>8</sup> ». Centripetalism, on the other hand, focuses on putting in place « institutional incentives for cross-ethnic behavior in order to encourage accommodation between rival groups<sup>9</sup> ». Centripetalists favor multiethnic political parties (which can encourage inter-group accommodation) and electoral incentives for crosscutting cooperation, accommodation and integration across ethnic divides<sup>10</sup>. Centripetalist designs address cleavages in a more indirect manner. Commonly used measures include distribution requirements (where candidates are required to obtain votes across districts), and transfer vote schemes (such as the alternative vote (AV) or single transferable vote (STV) scheme)<sup>11</sup>. In contrast to consociationalism and centripetalism, group repre-

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*ical Science*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011; C. BOUDREAU *e. a.*, « Racial or Spatial Voting? The Effects of Candidate Ethnicity and Ethnic Group Endorsements in Low-Information Elections », Working paper, University of California, Davis, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> This is especially, as Donald Horowitz observes, that groups in ethnically divided societies have a tendency, under conditions of free elections, to support ethnically based political parties representing their respective groups. He explains that « [a]n ethnically based party derives its support overwhelmingly from an identifiable ethnic group (or cluster of ethnic groups) and serves the interests of that group » (D. HOROWITZ, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley, California University Press, 1985, p. 291).

<sup>4</sup> See A. LIJPHART, « The Wave of Power-Sharing Democracy », in A. REYNOLDS (dir.), *The Architecture of Democracy: Constitutional Design, Conflict Management, and Democracy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Note generally Horowitz’s critique of ethnic power sharing in general: D.L. HOROWITZ, « Ethnic Power Sharing: Three Big Problems », *Journal of Democracy*, 25-2, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> A. LIJPHART, « Constitutional Design for Divided Societies », *Journal of Democracy*, 15, 2004 p. 96-7. Note generally Horowitz’s critique of ethnic power sharing in general: D.L. HOROWITZ, « Ethnic Power Sharing... », *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> B. REILLY, « Institutional Designs for Diverse Democracies: Consociationalism, Centripetalism and Communalism Compared », *European Political Science*, 11-2 2012, p. 259.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>9</sup> B. REILLY, « Centripetalism: Cooperation, Accommodation, and Integration », in S. WOLFF & C. YAKINTHOU, *Conflict Management in Divided Societies: Theories and Practice*, New York, Routledge, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the range of centripetal schemes in practice, see *ibid.*

sentation, or what Reilly calls communalist models, explicitly recognize the importance of group identity in political choices and action. Such models create mechanisms that directly address group diversity. Thus, for instance, explicit ethnic quotas or reserve seats for particular ethnic groups in elected chambers as well as other branches of government are considered communalist in nature.

In this article, using the example of Singapore, I want to examine a key dilemma that arises from measures that seek to include political minorities, particularly those who are excluded by reason of an aspect of their identity. This dilemma may be couched as such: measures seeking to include identity-based minority groups into the political process have to create special mechanisms (whether proportional representation, transfer votes, or quotas) targeted at these groups. However, such measures inevitably require the recognition and identification of group distinctions. This risks bringing about rigidification and entrenchment of those distinctions, thereby potentially deepening these social divisions. In the long run, therefore, these special measures could lead to factionalism, communalism, and indeed the balkanization of society. Ultimately, this could undermine democracy and political stability, rather than enhance it. As such, schemes aimed at enfranchising political minorities need to navigate between political inclusion and permanent division.

The Singapore example is instructive because ensuring that ethnic minorities are not politically and socially excluded has been a key concern for the government since its independence in 1965. Singapore is an ethnically diverse country with persons of Chinese ethnicity forming the majority, while those from Malay, Indian, and Eurasian ethnic backgrounds form the minority in the population. A key mechanism to ensure the political inclusion of ethnic minorities is the Group Representation Constituency (« GRC ») scheme introduced in 1988. The GRC keeps to the simple plurality, first-past-the-post system, but enlarges the voting constituency and requires candidates to run as a team, in which at least one candidate must be from an ethnic minority background<sup>12</sup>. In this regard, the GRC targets political party behaviour since it requires political parties to present a multi-ethnic slate of candidates in order to compete in those constituencies<sup>13</sup>. The scheme has been identified as a centripetal scheme<sup>14</sup> although it could be considered to incorporate elements of all three models. It is consociational insofar as it seeks to institute some form of interethnic power sharing through elite cooperation. It is centripetalist because it mandates some de-

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that these are not multi-member constituencies as conventionally understood as the candidates in the GRC contest as a team.

<sup>13</sup> « Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment No. 2) Bill », *Singapore Parliamentary Reports*, 12, 1988, p. 345-346.

<sup>14</sup> Reilly argues that it is more tokenistic than truly inclusive. As the rest of this article shows, I do not think that is necessarily the case. B. REILLY, « Institutional Designs for Diverse Democracies... », *op. cit.*, p. 263.

gree of multi-ethnicity within political parties<sup>15</sup>. Finally, it is communalist or institutionalizes group representation because it in effect imposes a baseline requirement for representatives of ethnic minorities to be included in Parliament.

However, as with many schemes aimed directly at political inclusion of minorities, the GRC relies on pre-determined group distinctions. As will be discussed below, identifying relevant groups and how to identify persons belonging these groups could raise issues of state imposition. The GRC tries to avoid this by relying on internal community determination. Nonetheless, the GRC's potential for entrenching communalism and parochialism was noted by opponents even during its inception. There was a concern that the scheme would make ethnicity an election issue each time<sup>16</sup>. This could result in greater ethnic division, rather than less. It is thus instructive to examine the impact of the GRC on ethnic politics.

In this article, I argue that the GRC has, instead of politicizing ethnicity and entrenching communalism, appeared to have depoliticized it. While this does not suggest that the GRC has overcome ethnic distinctions in Singaporean society, it at least appears not to have aggravated it, as some of its early critics predicted. In examining how the GRC has influenced the discourse about ethnicity, I want to shed light on some of the ways in which a minority inclusion measure could have a depoliticizing impact. The Singapore experience could have some generalizable relevance for other multi-ethnic societies grappling with the need for the majority principle to accommodate political minorities. While Singapore cannot be considered a liberal democracy – it been described as competitively authoritarian<sup>17</sup>, authoritarian constitutionalist<sup>18</sup>, or soft authoritarian<sup>19</sup> – it is hard to deny that reasonably free and fair elections have been held regularly since independence, injecting a measure of democratic accountability within the country. This is despite greater restrictions to civil liberties than most liberal democracies would

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<sup>15</sup> B. REILLY, «Centripetalism: Cooperation, Accommodation, and Integration», *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> For example, see opposition member Chiam See Tong's speech in response to the GRC proposal: «Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Bill», *Singapore Parliamentary Reports*, 11, 1988, p. 202-212. He noted: «I say that it is important that the PAP must prove and show by concrete evidence that their assumption is correct first, their assumption that in future elections the people of Singapore will be voting according to racial lines. They have to prove to us. Unless they can show that, I think this whole GRC system will fall flat. [...] The assumption that in future Singaporeans will vote according to their race is ridiculous. This is particularly so when Singapore in the 1980s has already gone through over two decades of nation building and the Singapore identity is already established ».

<sup>17</sup> S. LEVITSKY & L.A. WAY., *Competitive Authoritarianism. Problems of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> M. TUSHNET, «Authoritarian Constitutionalism», *Cornell Law Review*, 100, 2015, p. 396.

<sup>19</sup> K. TAN, *The Constitution of Singapore: A Contextual Analysis*, Oxford, Hart Publishing, 2015.

countenance, such as restrictions on freedom of speech and of the press, including defamation suits<sup>20</sup>. Nonetheless, competitive politics are present in some form in Singapore and its electoral design has some generalizable relevance for other multiethnic societies.

## **I. SINGAPORE'S GRC SCHEME: A BRIEF HISTORY**

« [H]ow will a non-Chinese fare against a Chinese [in a straight electoral fight]?<sup>21</sup> ». This question raised in the lead up to a recent by-election in Singapore highlights the continuing relevance of race or ethnicity in Singaporean politics. The ruling political party – the Peoples' Action Party (PAP) – fielded a candidate of Indian ethnicity in a bid to retain a parliamentary seat that had become vacant after one of its Members of Parliament resigned. As mentioned, Singapore is a multi-ethnic country. Demographic data in 2015 shows that persons of Chinese ethnicity constitute more than three quarters of the total citizen population (*i.e.* at 76.2%) whereas the Malays form the largest minority at 15% and those of Indian descent at 7.4%. Eurasians are classified as part of « Others », which constitute 1.4% of the citizen population<sup>22</sup>.

To the extent that ethnicity forms a basis for political choices and representation, Singapore's ethnic demography would suggest that the non-Chinese population could be a permanent political minority in the country. While this could be seen as an advantage for the Chinese majority, political inclusion has been a state priority and part of the common good. Ethnic division is commonly portrayed as a threat to Singapore's political stability. For this reason, while emphasizing the need for persons of different ethnicity to overcome their differences and to unite for the viability and success of Singapore, the government, which has been in the hands of the ruling People's Action Party (« PAP ») since independence, has maintained a strong control over inter-ethnic relations with the stated aim of maintaining racial and religious harmony. The crucial premise of Singapore's ethnic management approach is to ensure peaceful coexistence among the different groups, brokering settlements and incentivizing compromise and moderation (in both negative and positive ways) where necessary. Such political manage-

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<sup>20</sup> For a more extensive discussion, see C. SIM, « The Singapore Chill: Political Defamation and the Normalization of a Statist Rule of Law », *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal*, 20-2, 2011; Tsun HANG TEY, « Singapore's Jurisprudence of Political Defamation and its Triple-Whammy Impact on Political Speech », *Public Law*, 3, 2008; and D. TAN, « Whither the Autochthonous Narrative of Freedom of Speech in Singapore? A Guide to Defaming Politicians and Scandalising Judges », in J.L. NEO (dir.), *Constitutional Interpretation in Singapore: Theory and Practice*, Routledge, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> B. HENSON, « Bukit Batok BE: An electoral race that will shed light on race », *The Middle Ground*, 21 March 2016, <http://themiddleground.sg/2016/03/21/bukit-batok-by-election-an-electoral-race-that-will-shed-light-on-race/>.

<sup>22</sup> « National Population and Talent Division, Population in Brief 2015 », (September 2015), p. 17, available at <http://population.sg/population-in-brief/files/population-in-brief-2015.pdf>.

ment requires the government to closely monitor and judiciously balance<sup>23</sup> the interests of the majority and minority groups, intervening where necessary and urging groups to accept positions that take into account the broader public good, rather than narrow group interests<sup>24</sup>. It depends on a strong and highly proactive government for its success, which is present in Singapore. In contrast, a legal rights model, involving judicial deliberation, relies primarily on legal safeguards for minority groups. It is sometimes seen as inappropriate because it has less capacity to accommodate non-legal considerations such as social objectives and public goods. Thus, judicial-like models have been criticized as «likely to be relatively ineffective in handling claims which are tied up with long-standing group disputes deeply rooted in social and political problems<sup>25</sup> ».

Political management however does not always provide the visibility required in assuaging minorities that their interests are being taken into account. The lack of institutionalisation or formalisation also means that the interests of the minorities could be abandoned by later political leaders, even those within the same party. Indeed, Kevin Tan observes that while Parliament had an ethnically balanced mix of members even before the GRC was introduced, this was because the ruling PAP made it its policy to ensure that members of ethnic minorities were fielded at every general election<sup>26</sup>. This need for ethnic balance was also reflected in the presidency; prior to 1991, before the office was transformed into an elected one, the presidency was rotated among the four main ethnic groups in Singapore.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, when introducing the scheme, admittedly to a Parliament that it

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<sup>23</sup> The term judicious balancing is borrowed from a parliamentary speech by Encik Wan Hussin bin Hj Zohri where he stated, «As I see it, the translation of this Article [152(2)] into practical terms must, whilst taking cognizance of the special position of the Malays, take into account the interests of the majority of the non-Malays. In other words, there must be a blend or a judicious balance of minority and majority interests in a manner that is seen to be fair and just to the electorate. Thus, decisions that are to be taken by the Government will have to be based on a balance of all interests, *i.e.*, the special position of the Malays and also the legitimate interests of the non-Malays in Singapore ». *Singapore Parliamentary Reports*, Jan. 11, 1988, p. 247.

<sup>24</sup> J.L. NEO, «Minorities and the Constitution: A Judicious Balance? », in L.-A. THIO & K.Y.L. TAN (dir.), *Evolution of a Revolution: Forty Years of the Singapore Constitution*, London/New York, Routledge-Cavendish, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> G. PENTASSUGLIA, «On the Models of Minority Rights Supervision in Europe and How They Affect a Changing Concept of Sovereignty », *Eur. Y.B. Minority Issues*, 1, 29, 2001-2002.

<sup>26</sup> K.Y.L. TAN, *The Constitution of Singapore: A Contextual Analysis*, Oxford, Hart Publishing, 2015, 70, 2015, p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> The presidency was changed to an elected office in 1991 and since then, the capacity of the presidency to reflect ethnic diversity has been significantly reduced. The 2016 changes to the presidency to reserve certain elections for minority groups is meant to restore this particular aspect of the presidency as a multiethnic representative. See J.L. NEO, «Singapore's Constitutional Commission: Altering the Elected Presidency to Ensure Multiracialism», Sept. 30, 2016, ConstitutionNet, available at <http://www.constitutionnet.org/news/singapores-constitutional-commission-altering-elected-presidency-ensure-multiracialism>

overwhelmingly controls, the PAP government argued that it was necessary to pre-empt under-representation of ethnic minorities in Parliament. It claimed that there was a « voting trend which showed young voters preferring candidates who were best suited to their own needs without being sufficiently aware of the need to return a racially balanced party slate of candidates<sup>28</sup> ».

Under the GRC scheme, certain constituencies are designated as group constituencies, while others remain single-member constituencies. Each GRC may be made up of three to six candidates. As stated under article 39A(1) of the Singapore Constitution, at least one of the candidates in every group shall be a person belonging to the Malay community or alternatively Indian or other community<sup>29</sup>. Since the 1991 General Elections, which is the second general elections held after the introduction of the GRC, the majority of parliamentary seats have been contested in a GRC. For instance, in the 2015 General Elections, 85.4% of the seats were contested in a GRC. There were a total of 10 GRCs with at least one member belonging to the Malay community and 6 GRCs with at least one member belonging to the Indian or other minority communities. In comparison, there were 13 single-member constituencies, which means that the majority of parliamentarians were elected via a GRC<sup>30</sup>.

To be clear, the GRC is not meant to create mirror representation in Parliament. It is merely to ensure a baseline minimum of minority parliamentarians, *i.e.* to ensure that minority groups are not entirely shut out of the elected chamber<sup>31</sup>. It operates within a political system that has consistently sought to mitigate differences, rather than obliterating them. Indeed, the GRC scheme stems from a line of thinking among the political elites that a society comprised of different racial and religious groups would not be able to « organically sustain a social environment based on comity and harmony<sup>32</sup> ». Despite aspirational statements that Singaporeans shall be « one united people », « regardless of race, language, or religion », there remains « a strong belief that if left to their own devices, people will merely retreat into their homophilic shell, preferring to mingle only with those of a similar

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<sup>28</sup> Speech given by the then-First Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, in moving the second reading of the *Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Bill*, *Singapore Parliamentary Reports*, 11, 1988, p. 178.

<sup>29</sup> The change was done via a constitutional amendment: Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment) Act 1988 (Act No. 9 of 1988), and a statutory amendment: Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Act 1988 (Act No. 10 of 1988).

<sup>30</sup> The raw data can be obtained here: Singapore Elections Department: Singapore Elections Department, Parliamentary Elections Results, available at [http://www.eld.gov.sg/elections\\_past\\_parliamentary.html](http://www.eld.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary.html).

<sup>31</sup> Note that there is now a move to change the elected presidency scheme to ensure minority representation. Among the various proposals proffered are those that resemble a form of group representation scheme such as the GRC.

<sup>32</sup> M. MATHEWS & M.K.B. KHIDZER, « Preserving Racial and Religious Harmony in Singapore », in G. CHAN (dir.), *50 Years of Social Issues in Singapore*, New Jersey, World Scientific, 2015, p. 75, 78.

religion, race or language<sup>33</sup> ». It has been observed that there is a tendency to « mistrust » the citizen body's ability « to engage in dialogue and discourse without the situation deteriorating<sup>34</sup> ». Consequently, the government is extra vigilant in implementing various « disciplinary legal measure », which include a tight control of the press and public discourse in order to prevent any form of excessive racial and religious sentiments which may be offensive to others<sup>35</sup>. The government defends this as being necessary for « racial-religious harmony », which has become an almost quasi-constitutional principle, commonly and often seemingly unproblematically invoked to justify limits on individual rights. For instance, the only content-based restriction for public talks and rallies at Singapore's Speakers Corner pertains to matter relating to race and religion<sup>36</sup>. Furthermore, the Singapore government has established several political measures, besides the GRC, to promote multiculturalism and peaceful coexistence among the different groups. One such measure is the Ethnic Integration Policy (« EIP », which was introduced in 1989 to promote racial integration in public housing estates. Under this policy, permissible proportions are established for each ethnic group so as to prevent the concentration of ethnic groups within particular estates. This policy is aimed at ensuring that no single housing estate would become an ethnic enclave, and requires all ethnic groups to live and integrate with other groups<sup>37</sup>.

Despite its seemingly noble aim, the GRC scheme is one of the most heavily criticized innovation to Singapore's electoral system, with many critics arguing for its abolition<sup>38</sup>. Opposition politicians have, for instance, criticized the GRC system on the basis that it allows the ruling party to stifle opposition as it essentially increases barriers of entry for opposition parties. This is because opposition parties now have to assemble a group of credible candidates to contest in a GRC<sup>39</sup>. This is further aggravated by subsequent

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75, 81.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75, 77.

<sup>36</sup> *Terms and Conditions of Approval for Events and Activities Carried Out at Speakers' Corner, Hong Lim Park*, available at [http://www.nparks.gov.sg/cms/docs/speakers\\_terms\\_n\\_conditions.pdf](http://www.nparks.gov.sg/cms/docs/speakers_terms_n_conditions.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of the policy, see E.KB. TAN, « Multiracialism Engineered: The Limits of Electoral and Spatial Integration in Singapore », *Ethnopolitics*, 4-4, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> See e.g. Ngo Maruah's proposal to do away with the GRC scheme and reverting back to only single member constituencies. Instead, Maruah proposes the political parties contesting multiple constituencies should instead be required to maintain a specified minimum share of ethnic minority candidates (N. MARUAH, *Defending the Legitimacy of Singapore Elections: MARUAH Position Paper on the GRC system Q3 2013* (2013), available at <http://maruahsg.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/maruah-position-paper-on-the-grc-system1.pdf>).

<sup>39</sup> This criticism was first raised by Mr. Chiam See Tong in the 1988 Parliamentary debate on the GRC bills, and more recently by Ms. Sylvia Lim during parliamentary debates in 2010 (*Singapore Parliamentary Reports*, Jan. 11, 1988, p. 205; See also *Singapore Parliamentary Reports*, Apr. 26, 2010).



changes to the GRC scheme, which increased the size of the GRCs from three to a maximum of six and created more GRCs. The ruling party then further maximized its chances of winning GRCs by spreading cabinet ministers, who tend to enjoy higher visibility and popularity, across all the constituencies to draw more votes, making it more difficult for voters to favour an opposing team over the PAP team. Voting out the PAP team would mean voting out an existing, often tried and tested cabinet minister. Finally, the ministers are often grouped with new untested candidates, who are then voted in on the coat-tails of these anchor ministers<sup>40</sup>.

It should be noted that these arguments lost some of their traction after the 2011 general elections when the main opposition party (the Workers' Party) won a GRC, causing two Cabinet ministers and a Senior Parliamentary Secretary to lose their parliamentary seats<sup>41</sup>. Nonetheless, the disproportionate advantage that the GRC scheme offers the incumbent government cannot be discounted.<sup>42</sup> It is therefore quite interesting that the Singapore Prime Minister announced a commitment to reduce the average size of the GRCs (which would lower the barriers of entry for opposition parties). This could presumably address some of the disproportionate advantage that the GRC offers to the incumbent government<sup>43</sup>. Leaving these questions aside, which have been addressed in a range of academic literature, the key focus here is on the impact of the GRC as a minority inclusion scheme.

## II. THE GRC AND THE POLITICAL INCLUSION OF MINORITY GROUPS

As mentioned, a central dilemma in minority inclusion schemes is the risk of reifying differences and promoting communalism, sectarianism, factionalism, parochialism and the like. For instance, consociational schemes like proportional representation have been criticized for institutionalising party politics along existing cleavages. Under a proportional representation system, for example, political parties can appeal to a narrow segment of society so long as that gives them sufficient votes to obtain seats in parliament. Similarly, quota systems risk permanently emphasizing group divisions since they allocate power according to group attributes. Other criticisms include the intractability of identifying which groups should be represented and the problematic presumption that there are sufficiently shared attributes and values that could properly lead to a cluster of persons being

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<sup>40</sup> K.Y.L. TAN, « Constitutional Implications of the 1991 Singapore General Elections », *Singapore Law Review*, 13, 1992, p. 50. See also L. THIO, « The Right to Political Participation in Singapore: Tailor-making a Westminster-modelled Constitution to Fit the Imperatives of “Asian” Democracy », *Sing. J. of Int'l & Comp. Law*, 6, 2002, p. 218-219.

<sup>41</sup> R. CHANG, « Leadership Renewal », *Straits Times (Singapore)*, 23, 2015, available at <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/leadership-renewal>.

<sup>42</sup> N. TAN, « Manipulating Electoral Laws in Singapore », *Electoral Studies* 32, 2013, p. 632.

<sup>43</sup> P.M. Lee calls for smaller GRCs, more SMCs at next General Election, Channelnewsasia, 27 January 2016, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/pm-lee-calls-for-smaller/2462168.html>.

identified as a coherent group<sup>44</sup>. While centripetal schemes that only indirectly address cleavages within society are less likely to result in rigidification of division, those like the GRC which still depend on pre-determined group distinctions still have to grapple with this problem.

The GRC, in seeking to directly address ethnic differences as a factor in political choices, proceed from an understanding, or perhaps some may say assumption, that a person's identity – be it gender, religion, and/or ethnicity – is a relevant factor in politics. This recognition of identity politics is to be contrasted with a counter assumption that political ideas and choices can be abstracted from the identity of the person professing and representing them. In a 1994 article, Anne Phillips notes that this is a deeply held belief in liberal democracy. Liberal democrats believe in the *politics of ideas* whereby political differences are merely differences in opinions and beliefs, even if deeply held. Such differences, while stemming from a variety of experience, are considered in principle detachable from shared experiences. As such, representation becomes a matter of intellectual diversity rather than in identitarian terms. To illustrate, it does not matter if a man or a woman represents the female constituency, as long as they share the same intellectual commitments as that particular constituency. This politics of ideas, as Phillips calls it, therefore presumes a non-identitarian form of politics where ideas and principles matter more than a person's identity. Under this condition, « there is no additional requirement for the representatives to “mirror” the characteristics of the person or people represented<sup>45</sup> ». Indeed, she observes that « [m]uch of the radicalizing impetus to democracy has centered around initiatives to make ideas more rather than less important<sup>46</sup> ».

However, this emphasis on the politics of ideas, Phillips argues, makes liberal democracies unable to address the problems of political exclusion of social groups from the democratic process because of their race/ethnicity, religion, or gender<sup>47</sup>. Indeed, liberal majoritarian systems premised upon the idea of political choices as an exercise of individual autonomy determined by political ideas overlook the influence of identity politics. Political processes that are facially neutral could function to reproduce existing patterns of social inequality along group lines<sup>48</sup>. This is especially since it is not possible to entirely separate one's political ideas from one's particular experience, which is often influenced by one's identity. Consequently, there is now greater awareness that « the range of political ideas and preferences is seriously constrained by the characteristics of the people who convey

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<sup>44</sup> See A. PHILLIPS, « Cultural Skepticism and Group Representation' » in M. GURPREET (dir.), *Accommodating Diversity: Ideas and Institutional Practices*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 60 sq.

<sup>45</sup> A. PHILLIPS, « Dealing with Difference: A Politics of Ideas or a Politics of Presence? », *Constellations*, 1, 1, 1994, p. 76.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77-78.

<sup>48</sup> M.S. WILLIAMS, *Voice, Trust, and Memory: Marginalized Groups and the Failings of Liberal Representation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 78.

them<sup>49</sup> ». Phillips calls this alternative the *politics of presence*. Similarly, Melissa Williams argues that fair representation is powerfully affected by the identity of legislators and requires the inclusion of minority groups in decision-making bodies because their interests are more likely to be overlooked and policies made biased against them if they are not present<sup>50</sup>. In the same vein, Iris Young has emphasized that specific representation for oppressed groups gives voices to assumptions and priorities of groups other than those of the privileged<sup>51</sup>. It « better ensures that all needs and interests in the public will be recognized in democratic deliberations<sup>52</sup> ».

Furthermore, while identity politics has been presented as inimical to democracy, this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, Gutmann argues that identity groups are not inherently good or bad for democracy but should be assessed according to whether their claims advance the basic principles of democratic justice<sup>53</sup>. She adopts the view similar to Phillips' and Young's that democratic policy choice « *is bound up with both how people identify themselves and what they therefore want*<sup>54</sup> ». She defends identity politics against three criticisms commonly raised against identity groups in favour of interest groups. First, critics claim that identity groups are less likely to compromise than interest groups. Secondly, critics argue that identity politics is inherently sectarian and therefore inimical to egalitarian reform. Thirdly, identity groups are considered undemocratic because they depend on ascriptive, rather than voluntary, membership. Gutmann points out however that the criticism of being non-compromising tends to conflate identity with interests. While identity groups may organize according to their identities, their aim of organization is also to pursue their instrumental interests. As such, while identity groups do not compromise their identities, they can and often do compromise on their group-based interests. In any case, Gutmann points out, being uncompromising is not necessarily harmful to democracy since it depends on the nature of the issue. Some issues should not be compromised, such as equal rights for women and minorities. Furthermore, it is not the case that interest groups are more compromising. In fact, since they are organized according to a shared interest, such groups may in fact be less compromising on certain core issues.

On the issue of egalitarian reform, Gutmann further points out that much depends on the content of the principles as well as the nature of those identity groups. Not only is there no evidence that democratic politics would be more egalitarian in redistributing income and wealth in the absence of identity group politics, one could imagine that both identity and interest

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<sup>49</sup> A. PHILLIPS, « Dealing with Difference... », *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>50</sup> M.S. WILLIAMS, *Voice, Trust, and Memory...* », *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>51</sup> I.M. YOUNG, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 185.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> A. GUTMANN, *Identity in Democracy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

groups, depending on the nature of these groups, could be supportive or obstructive to egalitarianism. Indeed, as she puts it: « The ideology of identity groups is so diverse as to defy the generalization that it is either antiuniversalist and antiegalitarian, or the reverse ». On the third criticism, Gutmann points out that not all identity groups are necessarily non-voluntary. For instance, many religious groups depend on voluntary acceptance of the particular religion. In any case, the fact that identity groups are involuntary is not a sufficient reason to criticise them as long as there is freedom to exit or abstain from being identified with those groups<sup>55</sup>.

Gutmann's defense of identity politics has its merits. Nonetheless, there is cause to try to minimize the negative impact of identity politics, rather than encourage it. Notably, while Singapore is by no means a liberal democracy, the political debate surrounding the introduction of the GRC suggests a disagreement between the notion of politics as non-racialized and ideational and the notion of politics as necessarily influenced by identity. In other words, the debate appears to be rooted in a claim that the politics of ideas should govern rather than the politics of presence, using Phillips' terms. Critics to the GRC opposed its implementation as being unnecessary and argued that it would instead perpetuate communalism since it puts ethnicity at the forefront of the voters' minds<sup>56</sup>. By « representing people via their membership of a group – rather than as individual citizens and members of the polity as a whole », mechanisms such as the GRC arguably risks « fragmenting the nation, intensifying divisions, encouraging parochialism, and promoting the pursuit of sectional interest<sup>57</sup> ». This is especially if political representatives see themselves as being representatives of the particular group first, and as representatives of the nation second.

Furthermore, with respect to Singapore, critics have questioned whether it is true that minority MPs would have less success in winning single-member constituencies. Several examples have been raised to support their view that ethnicity does not play a part in electoral choices and that the GRC should be abolished. For instance, it has been pointed out that PAP fielded a Malay candidate, who convincingly won his seat in a single member ward in the 1988 General Elections<sup>58</sup>. Another common example raised is of a PAP candidate, who is from a Eurasian background and who won the

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> For example, see opposition member Chiam See Tong's speech in response to the GRC proposal: « Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Bill », *Singapore Parliamentary Reports*, Jan. 11, 1988, p. 202-212. He noted: « I say that it is important that the PAP must prove and show by concrete evidence that their assumption is correct first, their assumption that in future elections the people of Singapore will be voting according to racial lines. They have to prove to us. Unless they can show that, I think this whole GRC system will fall flat. [...] The assumption that in future Singaporeans will vote according to their race is ridiculous. This is particularly so when Singapore in the 1980s has already gone through over two decades of nation building and the Singapore identity is already established ».

<sup>57</sup> A. PHILLIPS, « Cultural Skepticism and "Group Representation" », *op. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> Singapore Elections Department, 1988 Parliamentary Elections Results, available at [http://www.eld.gov.sg/elections\\_past\\_parliamentary1988.html](http://www.eld.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary1988.html).

Punggol East single member ward at the 2011 General Elections with 54.54% of the vote against two Chinese opposition candidates<sup>59</sup>. More recently, PAP's candidate from an ethnic Indian background won the by-election in a single member ward with 61.21 per cent of the votes against a candidate from an ethnic Chinese background.

These are important signs that ethnicity of the candidate may not necessarily be the most decisive factor in electoral choices. It may well be that political party affiliation are more important than all other factors since these examples are of candidates from the ruling political party triumphing in elections. Other indicators have also been observed as “proving” that the GRC is no longer relevant. Norshahril points out that in the 2015 general elections, « constituencies with majority Chinese voters have voted for non-Chinese PAP candidates » and « PAP minority candidates have led their team to victory in some GRCS ». Furthermore, it is suggested that voters do not vote along ethnic lines since PAP has won a GRC with a majority of the Chinese votes even where the anchor minister is a Malay.<sup>60</sup> Norshahril argues that these examples show that a majority of Chinese in the constituency voted along party lines rather than by candidates' ethnicity<sup>61</sup>. Indeed, there are suggestions that factors such as party affiliation, national issues, economic stability, personality and charisma, ability to speak the local language or dialect, and local factors such as town council issues, have become more important than ethnicity in influencing voters choices<sup>62</sup>.

It may well be that ethnic politics now has less salience than political party affiliation or even ideological positions. However, the discussion surrounding the Bukit Batok by-elections mentioned at the beginning of section I suggests that ethnicity has not become an entirely irrelevant point of contention in Singaporean politics. In fact, that the politicization of ethnicity in the by-elections occurred in the context of a single-member constituency, as opposed to a GRC, could point to the latter's effectiveness in downplaying ethnic politics. If this assessment is true, the question that we must ask is why has the GRC not led to politicization of ethnic politics as was predicted by its detractors? One possible reason could be the muted competition in the past general elections to which the GRC scheme could have contributed be-

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<sup>59</sup> Following his election as MP, Michael Palmer (of Eurasian background) was appointed Speaker of Parliament but resigned in 2012. The opposition Workers' Party later won the seat in a by-election. J. AU YONG, « Workers' Party wins Punggol East by-election with 54.52% of valid votes », *Straits Times (Singapore)*, 26, 2013, available at <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/workers-party-wins-punggol-east-by-election-with-5452-of-valid-votes>.

<sup>60</sup> An example give is that of a Malay candidate who was the anchor minister for the PAP's Jalan Besar GRC team. The team garnered 67% of the votes in a constituency with a demographic breakdown reflective of most constituencies: a Chinese majority of 76.4%, Malay minority of 7.2%, and Indian minority of 13.7% of the total votes. S. NORSHAHRI, « Singapore Beyond Ethnicity: Rethinking the Group Representative Constituency Scheme », *The Round Table*, 2, 105, 2016, p. 196.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200-201.

cause of its raised barriers to compete and propensity to facilitate increased gerrymandering. However, I want to suggest that the lack of competition is not the only reason as ethnic issues continued to dominate a segment of political discourse in Singapore and ethnic groups have at various points sought to organize and mobilize themselves politically, albeit without too much success in challenging the governmental power. Ethnic discourse has never been removed, and at the very least, one crucial question is how the GRC could nonetheless have resulted in depoliticizing ethnicity, rather than politicizing it.

### **III. GRC AND THE DEPOLITICIZATION OF ETHNIC POLITICS**

Here, I want to posit six features of the GRC scheme that could have had a depoliticizing effect on ethnicity. First, in the GRC scheme, minority representation is guaranteed but only as part of a multi-ethnic team. This means that political parties must be able to reach out to minority candidates and include them in their electoral bid. This differentiates the scheme from proportional representation systems where a political party can campaign by appealing solely to narrow sectarian interests and obtain seats in parliament as long as they attain a certain percentage of the votes. The GRC scheme therefore could be said to be less likely to « encourage politicians to exhort the elector to vote for the party which represents his ethnicity in order to ensure ethnic representation in Parliament », as might be the case in a proportional representation scheme<sup>63</sup>. Unlike the proportional representation scheme, the GRC scheme still requires the team of candidates to win a plurality. It is not sufficient to only convince a threshold proportion of voters to choose the political party. The team of candidates compete on the same basis as they would in a non-group representation scheme. In other words, they still have to appeal to national interests and the common good in order to receive a plurality of the votes<sup>64</sup>.

The GRC scheme thus provides specific electoral incentives for politicians to moderate their political rhetoric on potentially divisive issues and broaden their policy positions. This moderating effect occurs as an internal factor within the political party and more specifically within the team of candidates. Notably, the ethnic distribution of the various constituencies has meant that candidates could hypothetically win elections without reaching out to minority communities within the constituencies since the Chinese are likely to be the majority in all the constituencies<sup>65</sup>. However, candidates

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<sup>63</sup> See Report of the Constitutional Commission 1966 at para 48, reproduced in K.Y.L. TAN *e. a.* (dir.), *Constitutional Law in Malaysia and Singapore*, Singapore/Austin, Malayan Law Journal/Butterworth Legal Publishers, 1991, p. 1027.

<sup>64</sup> The politics of the common good is often counterpoised with the politics of faction in discourses such as French republicanism, whereby there is a strong conviction that politicians should not speak for factions or regions or classes but for the collectivity as a whole (A. PHILLIPS, « Cultural Skepticism and “Group Representation” », *op. cit.*).

<sup>65</sup> For an examination of the relationship between the GRC and the Ethnic Integration Policy, which maintains ethnic proportions across public housing estates in Singapore, see Eu-

from a Chinese majority background are discouraged from raising communal issues favouring the Chinese majority as they presumably would not want to alienate their fellow minority teammates, especially since this presents a view of a disunited and possibly less electable team. These minority candidates would also presumably protest when this happens, or risk being deemed inauthentic to minority voters. This raises another moderating impact of the GRC, which is that minority candidates have to be careful to draw a sometimes difficult balance between touting their minority credentials, while not over-emphasizing them<sup>66</sup>. For instance, a minority candidate may lose votes for the team if s/he over-champions minority rights, thus alienating those from other ethnic groups<sup>67</sup>. At the same time, another minority candidate may also lose votes if s/he is deemed by the minority voters as being inauthentic<sup>68</sup>. A delicate balance has to be struck.

Secondly, the GRC scheme makes ethnic-based political parties electorally unviable. It ensures that no political party can campaign on only ethnic issues, unless it wishes to campaign only in single-member wards. This is reinforced by the redistribution of ethnic groups under the Ethnic Integration Policy (mentioned earlier), which means that no one single constituency, even in single-member wards, contains a sufficiently large ethnic enclave to allow for any particular minority group to win without appealing to the majority. One such political party that has been rendered almost redundant is the *Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura* (PKMS or the Singapore Malay National Organisation), which operates on a pro-Malay platform<sup>69</sup>. Ethnic-based parties politicize ethnic issues as part of their agenda since they « derive support overwhelmingly from an identifiable ethnic group and serve the interests of that group<sup>70</sup> » However, in order to compete in GRCs, PKMS has had to reach out to non-ethnic based parties to form teams to contest in the elections. For instance, in the 1997 elections, PKMS

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gene K.B. TAN, « Multiracialism Engineered: The Limits of Electoral and Spatial Integration in Singapore », *Ethnopolitics*, 4, 2007.

<sup>66</sup> S. NORSHAHRI, « Singapore Beyond Ethnicity... », *op. cit.*, p. 199.

<sup>67</sup> For instance, Norshahril opines that the opposition party, Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) may have lost party votes when its Malay candidate, Damanhuri Abbas, an activist who has been involved in the Malay/Muslim grassroots organisation Muhammadiyah, « over-champion[ed] minority rights » by raising several sensitive questions on Malay rights, including the right for nurses to put on the tudung (veil) (*ibid*).

<sup>68</sup> An example is of SDP's Malay candidates, Sidek Malek, being criticised by Malay voters for not answering a media question in the Malay language, thus raising doubt about his authenticity as a Malay candidate, *ibid*.

<sup>69</sup> PKMS was the first established as the Singapore arm of the Malaysian United Malay National Organisation, which was part of the ruling alliance in Malaysia. It was forced to sever connections with UMNO Malaysia when Singapore seceded from the Federation of Malaysia. PKMS' objectives include to « safeguard and work for the implementation of the special rights of the Malays in Singapore as enunciated in the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore », to « take whatever steps as may be necessary for the advancement of the Malay language and culture » and to « safeguard and to promote the advancement of Islam without interfering in the affairs of other religions » (PKMS, Mission Statement, available at <http://pkms.org.sg/mission-statement/>).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*.

collaborated with the Singapore Democratic Party («SDP»), and in the 2001 elections, it collaborated with the Singapore Democratic Alliance («SDA»). Both SDP and SDA are not ethnic based political parties.

Academics like Lily Zubaidah Rahim however have criticized schemes like the Ethnic Integration Policy and the GRC for undermining the political power of the Malay community by permanently locking them into the position of an electoral minority in all constituencies<sup>71</sup>. Indeed, the GRC replaces this political power by requiring minorities to cooperate with the majority to gain electoral support. While this admittedly blunts the political and electoral clout of the minority group, it does so by ensuring that minority groups will always be represented in Parliament. This representation is one that is balanced against the interethnic requirements discussed above, which may not satisfy those who wish to see their representatives make more visible and forceful assertions of minority interests. Nonetheless, one might question whether minority groups are better off cooperating with the majority or worse off. Consider the Malay minority in Singapore. Malays have consistently formed about 15% of the total population. Without resettlement, they could possibly form majorities in several constituencies, thereby exercising real political influence in who gets to be their representative in those constituencies. They may well vote in politicians running on platforms of minority group interests alone, such as those from PKMS. However, without more, such groups will never have sufficient numbers to influence political choices nation-wide. For example, even without the GRC scheme in place, PKMS would never have been able to win sufficient seats to form the government. Their potential influence over national issues would be minimal. In a context where ethnic based parties dominate or where the strongest party focus solely on winning the votes of the majority, this could mean that the interests of minority groups are more likely to be marginalised. While the minority groups may be able to control some seats in Parliament, they will persistently be in the minority. It is not entirely clear that such a position is better than one where the minority representatives is able to influence national policy through interethnic cooperation which could lead to greater focus on minority issues as a matter of *national*, rather than merely *communal*, interests.

Indeed, one outcome of the GRC scheme has been to influence political parties in the opposition to pay more attention to minority issues, if not only to gain more minority votes within the contested constituency. For instance, the main opposition party in Singapore, the Workers' Party, has conceded publicly that their past electoral performance were affected by their failure to engage minority communities<sup>72</sup>. In subsequent years, the party rolled out a post-election action plan to «attract more Malay members and reach out to the community» and sought to include more Malay party members in

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<sup>71</sup> L.Z. RAHIM, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 67-81.

<sup>72</sup> T. CHING LI, «Studying the election report card», *Today (Singapore)*, 10, 2006, available at <http://www.todayonline.com/articles/117540.asp#>.



leadership positions<sup>73</sup>. Other political parties have also started to address issues specific to minority groups. In 2013, the Singapore Democratic Party («SDP») issued a policy paper addressing the concerns of the Malay community<sup>74</sup>.

Thirdly, the GRC scheme moderates ethnic discourse as it insulates minority parliamentarians who are elected from having to directly appeal to their minority group for support. Of course, because their ethnic status is a relevant factor for their inclusion in a particular team of candidates, these minority parliamentarians would still feel the need to pay more attention to the needs and interests of their ethnic groups. In the context of Singapore, a survey of parliamentary debates over the years suggests that parliamentarians who raise minority issues in Parliament are disproportionately from ethnic minority backgrounds. This has been the case even before the GRC was instituted. For instance, parliamentary reports for the 4<sup>th</sup> Parliament (between 1977 and 1980) show that of the 37 issues relating to ethnic minorities raised during the sessions, only three were raised by Members of Parliament from an ethnic Chinese background<sup>75</sup>. This trend broadly continued after the GRC scheme was introduced. This suggests that the ideal of representation on the basis of ideas alone may well remain elusive in Singapore. What the GRC scheme ensures is that minority parliamentarians continue to be present, thereby increasing the likelihood that minority issues would be adequately raised and discussed in the legislative chamber. However, the connection that these parliamentarians have with their ethnic group is mediated through the team and the political party. This insulates them from the need to directly appeal to their ethnic groups for support and distances them from strong pressure to represent their ethnic group interests in an even more assertive fashion. Should their electoral success depend solely on group support, they would feel even more compelled to raise minority issues in a more visible and possibly less compromising fashion so as to be able to hold themselves out as champions of the group.

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<sup>73</sup> Z. HUSSAIN, «WP forms “action plan” to attract more Malays», *Straits Times (Singapore)*, 3, 2007, available at <https://wpsn.wordpress.com/2007/02/03/st-03-02-2007/>; see also A. ONG, *WP discusses minority outreach*, *The Sunday Times (Singapore)*, 13, 2012, available at <http://www.asiaone.com/print/News/Latest%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20121112-383039.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Singapore Democratic Party, *SDP’s 10-Point Plan to Improve Malay Conditions*, 8, 2013, available at [http://yoursdp.org/news/sdp\\_s\\_10\\_point\\_plan\\_to\\_improve\\_malay\\_conditions/2013-09-08-5705](http://yoursdp.org/news/sdp_s_10_point_plan_to_improve_malay_conditions/2013-09-08-5705); see also Singapore Democratic Party, *Berita Harian Reports on Malay Paper*, Oct. 2, 2013, available at [http://yoursdp.org/news/berita\\_harian\\_reports\\_on\\_malay\\_paper\\_finally/2013-10-02-5720](http://yoursdp.org/news/berita_harian_reports_on_malay_paper_finally/2013-10-02-5720); Mohd Jufrie Mahmood & Jufri Salim, *An Open Letter to the Editor of Berita Harian*, Feb. 12, 2015, available at [http://yoursdp.org/publ/perspectives/an\\_open\\_letter\\_to\\_the\\_editor\\_of\\_berita\\_harian/2-1-0-1476](http://yoursdp.org/publ/perspectives/an_open_letter_to_the_editor_of_berita_harian/2-1-0-1476).

<sup>75</sup> Data on file with author.

Fourthly, the GRC scheme seeks to avoid a key problem of identification by leaving the matter to community determination. Notably, many group representation measures not only presume the existence of identifiable groups with shared attributes, experiences, and values<sup>76</sup>, they also need to prescribe a way to identify persons who can be said to be part of the group. Whichever definition one adopts, there is always a tendency for such schemes to create tensions within and without a group. Categories that seek to capture differences also risk essentializing identities and present themselves as all-embracing, thereby ignoring differences within those groups. The state could also be accused of interfering in the group's internal autonomy. In the context of Singapore, the GRC scheme operates within a deeply pervasive mode of ethnic thinking in Singapore's political and bureaucratic system<sup>77</sup>. It employs the official census quadratomy of CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others) currently used in the provision of public services<sup>78</sup>, though not in a discriminatory manner<sup>79</sup>. There is therefore legitimate concern that the GRC will contribute to the perception that ethnic differences are inherently distinctive and impermeable.

However, the GRC scheme presumably mitigates this by making the issue of definition a matter of internal determination. Under the rules, who is considered a member of those communities will be determined by committees established to provide such certification. The two criteria are: first, that the person considers himself to be a member of the community; and secondly, that he is generally accepted as such by that community. In the context of Singapore's pervasive ethnic classification system in its bureaucracy, such determination has never raised any issues since most people would have their ethnic affiliation clearly determined prior to an election, e.g. in their national identity cards. Nonetheless, by making the question of whether a person can be a representative from a minority background a matter of internal determination, the state is seen as being detached from that thorny question of ethnic identification. This will have even more significant impact in the future if cross-cultural children could choose which ethnic group they wish to identify with in order to run as a minority representative candidate. For instance, a child of Chinese and Indian parents could elect to be identified as an Indian and run as a minority candidate in a GRC. While there are currently persons of mixed heritage who have contested in GRCs as minority candidates, this has never been an issue because the official policy in the past was that they would be classified according to the father's

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<sup>76</sup> A. PHILLIPS, « Cultural Skepticism and “Group Representation” », *op. cit.*

<sup>77</sup> A. ACKERMANN, « “They Give us the Categories and We Fill Ourselves In”: Ethnic Thinking in Singapore », *Int'l J. of Minority and Group Rights*, 4, 1997.

<sup>78</sup> M.D. BARR & Z. SKRBIS, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-building Project*, Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2008, p.51; A. ACKERMANN, « “They Give us the Categories and We Fill Ourselves...” », *op. cit.*

<sup>79</sup> This is one of the findings of the Baseline Study on Indicator of Racial and Religious Harmony Unveiled, *OnePeople.sg & Institute of Policy Studies*, 18, 2013, available at [http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/04/IPS-OnePeople.sg-Press-Release-on-Indicators-of-Racial-and-Religious-Harmony\\_180713\\_Press-Release.pdf](http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/04/IPS-OnePeople.sg-Press-Release-on-Indicators-of-Racial-and-Religious-Harmony_180713_Press-Release.pdf).

ethnicity. However, this official policy has changed such that children can today obtain a double-barrelled classification, although the government still views the first cited ethnicity as the dominant one for purposes of governmental policy. This however appears to be subject to individual election at a later stage. In fact, those who have been registered as being of a singular ethnicity before the implementation of the policy could also apply to change to a double-barrelled ethnicity<sup>80</sup>. This flexibility raises the possibility that a person registered as Chinese-Indian, for example, could elect to stand in a GRC as a minority candidate as long as s/he satisfies the dual criteria of self-identification and community acceptance.

Fifthly, the GRC ensures a formal forum for leaders or representatives of the various racial groups to negotiate and cooperate<sup>81</sup>. It shifts the locus of any debate on communal issues to the *internal* parliamentary chamber, as opposed to the *external* campaigning site. Whereas early parliamentary debates revolved around ideological debates as to how to best protect the rights of minority groups, whether through equality of rights or through substantive minority protection, as well as how minorities could best be assimilated or integrated into Singapore, parliamentary debates in recent times revolved around more technical discussions about how best to address issues that disproportionately or specially affect minority groups. Thus, one can see the transformation of political discourse on ethnicity from « vivid clashes over ideology » into « dull, technical discussion[s] about means for promoting goals [multi-ethnicity] questioned by none<sup>82</sup> ». Commonly raised issues include how to attract more Malay talents in government, and how to mitigate disparities in educational achievements among minorities in Singapore<sup>83</sup>. This conforms to an understanding of depoliticization where « [e]ven if ideological differences are not wiped out altogether ideological differences are deemphasized in a depoliticized political community<sup>84</sup> ».

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<sup>80</sup> Immigration and Checkpoints Authority, *Greater Flexibility with Implementation of Double-Barrelled Race Option from 1 January 2011*, 29 December 2010, [https://www.ica.gov.sg/news\\_details.aspx?nid=12443](https://www.ica.gov.sg/news_details.aspx?nid=12443) accessed 10 June 2016.

<sup>81</sup> See for example the public reaction to the Wee Commission report: Lee points out that almost no minority group in Singapore can say that they are not represented by someone in the Wee Commission who understands some part of their life and practices makes the commission's findings all that much more valuable. The members were Wee Chong Jing Chief Justice, AP Rajah (Speaker), CFJ Ess, MJ Namazie, CC Tan, SHD Elias, Syed Esa bin Syed Hassan Almendoar, G Abisheganaden, G Starforth Hill, Abdul Manaf Ghows, Kirpal Singh, *Singapore Parliamentary Reports*, 15, 1967, p. 1291-1292.

<sup>82</sup> U. HIMMELSTRAND, « A Theoretical and Empirical Approach to Depoliticization and Political Involvement », *Acta Sociologica*, 6 (1/2), 1962, p. 83. This conforms to his characterization of depoliticization as « a transformation of political ideologies into a set of more or less distinct administrative technologies based on a widespread consensus as to what kind of goals one should try to attain ».

<sup>83</sup> P. SINGH, « Rally Speech », No. 2, May 1, 2011, available at <https://singapore2025.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/aljunied-grc-pritam-singh-rally-speeches/>.

<sup>84</sup> U. HIMMELSTRAND, « A Theoretical and Empirical Approach to Depoliticization... », *op. cit.*

Notably, in Singapore today, even opponents to the GRC accept that minority representation is an important aim. They accept that minority underrepresentation would pose significant problems. Consequently, proposals to abolish the GRC are often coupled with alternative proposals to address underrepresentation of minorities in Parliament<sup>85</sup>. As such, the GRC appears to have taken the question of whether minorities need to be protected in the legislative chamber out of the political discourse and this could have a depoliticizing effect on ethnicity.

Lastly, the GRC has been intertwined with the town councils and this has a depoliticizing effect on ethnicity. This is because political legitimacy becomes tied to the representatives' capacity to manage local government, instead of their ethnicity<sup>86</sup>. As Thio Li-ann points out, the official reasons for introducing the town council is extraneous to the constitutional rationale for the GRCs, which is to ensure multi-ethnic representation<sup>87</sup>. Elected Members of Parliament lead the town councils of their respective constituency, which address local estate management matters. There are currently 16 town councils managing the various housing estates in Singapore. The town council scheme has been characterized as a form of « political tutelage » where the Members of Parliament have to exercise their administrative skills to manage, maintain, and improve the common property of the public housing estate and commercial property within their towns<sup>88</sup>. Politicians therefore are more likely to be judged on their administrative skills, rather than their ethnicity as a result of this town council scheme. That said, certain stereotyping may still take place such that certain assumptions are made about a person's competence based on his/her ethnicity. However, the GRC scheme indirectly addresses this because it allows untested politicians to take charge of a town council as part of a team. This gives them the opportunity to hone their administrative abilities, creating a political deposit that could then pay off at the next general elections. Thus, as a whole, the GRC could be seen to be directed at mitigating the impact of ethnic identity on political choices.

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<sup>85</sup> See e.g. MARUAH, « Defending the Legitimacy of Singapore Elections: Maruah Position Paper on the GRC system Q3 2013 (2013) », available at <http://maruahsg.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/maruah-position-paper-on-the-grc-system1.pdf>; National Solidarity Party, *Electoral Reform Proposal: Constituency Reserved for Minority Scheme*, 3, 2014, <http://nsp.sg/2014/07/03/electoral-reform-proposal-constituency-reserved-for-minority-scheme/>; W.T. KOH, « An Upper House to house government bodies? », *The Middle Ground*, 17, 2015, available at <http://themiddleground.sg/tag/kevin-tan/>; C. PHUA *e. a.*, « Time for two Houses of Parliament? », *Straits Times (Singapore)*, 1, 2015, available at <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/time-for-two-houses-of-parliament>.

<sup>86</sup> I would like to thank Kevin Y.L. Tan for raising this excellent point.

<sup>87</sup> L. THIO, « Neither Fish nor Fowl: Town Councils, Community Development Councils and the Cultivation of Local Government/Governance in Singapore », in H. KUDO, G. LADU, L. PEGORARO (dir.), *Municipi d'Oriente: Il Governo Locale in Europa Orientale, Asia e Australia*, Roma, Donzelli, 2008 (Eng. transl.: Centre for Constitutional Studies and Democratic Development, 2009, p. 373).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* See G.C. TONG, *Singapore Parliamentary Reports*, 28 June 1988, col. 381.

## CONCLUSION

Ethnic differences cannot be ignored in any democracy that aims to be inclusive and indeed to be stable in the long run. However, any attempts to capture ethnic difference risks reifying ethnic identity and essentializing it. In this regard, political measures that seek to be inclusive could risk entrenching difference and undermine social cohesion in the long run. This is a balance that is difficult to navigate – to recognize difference without hardening the boundaries of distinction such that those within each category cannot transcend those boundaries to reach out and socially cohere with one another.

This article has sought to analyse the balance that Singapore's GRC scheme has drawn in ensuring minority representation but without over-politicizing and thereby rigidifying difference. Nonetheless, its aims are modest in that it does not seek to have transformative effect of obliterating the ethnic-thinking that currently pervades Singaporean society. More has to be done on other fronts to overcome stereotypes that may be associated with different ethnic categories, which is still currently the case. While these categories make ethnic differences « administratively transparent, visible and manageable », « their fixity also inhibits ethnic boundary porousness and discounts multiple identity crossings that are realities in Singapore<sup>89</sup> ». As Lai puts it, there is a certain « one-to-one correspondence » in the official discourses on race in Singapore<sup>90</sup>. Such thinking perpetuates « a strictly primordialist conception of society, whereby ethnic characteristics are in-born, unchanging and unchangeable<sup>91</sup> ». There is therefore a tendency for ethnicity, culture and race to « become self-fulfilling prophecies, always generating outcomes that are somewhat independent of social reality and seen as deeply seeded in each of the ethnic and racial groups concerned<sup>92</sup> ». The GRC scheme does not attempt to overcome this rigidity but also seeks not to unduly contribute to it. As a minority inclusion scheme, it appears to have depoliticized ethnicity in some respects, rather than politicizing it. The moderating, centralising impact of the GRC is worthy of greater attention and should not merely be dismissed as tokenistic.

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> L.A. ENG, *Meanings of Multiethnicity: A Case Study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Singapore*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 179.

<sup>91</sup> M.D. BARR & Z. SKRBIS, *Constructing Singapore*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.