

PARLIAMENT

'A positive step' for women

Analysts, MPs hail move to appoint Halimah Yacob as Speaker of Parliament

TAN WEIZHEN AND AMIR HUSSAIN
 weizhen@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE – For the first time in the Republic's history, there will be a Madam Speaker in the House, when Minister of State (Social and Family Development) Halimah Yacob, 58, is formally elected on Jan 14 by Members of Parliament (MPs) as the next Speaker.

While analysts and her fellow MPs hailed the move to appoint a woman to the position, which is behind only the Prime Minister and the President, they reiterated that the appointment is based on merit.

Deputy Speaker Charles Chong — who is currently the Acting Speaker — said that it is "about time we had a lady Speaker".

"It's not that there are no capable women who can be Speakers but they may not have been given an opportunity, so I think it's quite timely. Having said that, she was not appointed purely because of her gender ... she was appointed purely on merit."

Singapore Management University (SMU) political scientist Bridget Welsh said the impending appointment is "a positive step for sure, as Singapore has one of the least females in the Cabinet, in the region".



Associate Professor Welsh said: "She's not just a woman, but a Malay. So it's a two for one, and it widens the representation."

Apart from being the ceremonial head of Parliament, the Speaker assumes the duties of the President if the President and the chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisers are

Mdm Halimah will be the third consecutive Speaker from a minority race, after Mr Abdullah Tarmugi and Mr Michael Palmer.
TODAY FILE PHOTO

both away.

Mdm Halimah, who was first elected as an MP in 2001, will relinquish her current portfolio a day before the Parliament sitting.

She replaces former Speaker Michael Palmer, who resigned last month after admitting to an extramarital affair.

Mdm Halimah will be the third consecutive Speaker from a minority race — after Mr Palmer and his predecessor Abdullah Tarmugi.

SMU law lecturer Eugene Tan felt that the circumstances under which Mr Palmer resigned may have some bearing on the choice of Mdm Halimah, instead of a "predictable" option. "Looking at the events of December, someone like her would inspire confidence in Parliament," he said.

On Mdm Halimah's current portfolio — which includes the areas of social services and childcare — analysts felt that it is "too important" to remain vacant for long, given the Government's focus on social and family issues.

Assoc Prof Welsh threw up the name of Moulmein-Kallang GRC MP Denise Phua as a possible option to take over the job. Like Mdm Halimah before she was made an officeholder in 2011, Ms Phua is a vocal advocate for social causes in Parliament, Assoc Prof Welsh said.

"It will also send a strong signal — another woman is appointed to replace one," she added.