

PROFILE

‘HK STUCK IN THE PAST FOR TOO LONG’

Academic and member of new high-powered ‘diversity list’ warns that the window for the city to become economically self-sufficient is closing

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The University of Science and Technology’s campus in Clear Water Bay was shrouded in April fog, but its myriad hallways and buildings remained familiar to Professor Naubahar Sharif—part of the very first cohort of students to step into the institution’s classrooms in 1991, and now a lecturer in the burgeoning field of innovation and technology development.

And just like the Hong Kong-born-and-bred professor’s long history with his alma mater, Sharif also represents the Pakistani community’s entrenched narrative with Hong Kong—despite the limited say of ethnic minorities in the city’s affairs.

But there are hopes that the non-Chinese community’s lack of a voice will soon change, with Sharif one of the 16 candidates on the “diversity list” revealed last month—an unprecedented registry of the ethnic minority community’s cream of the crop able to sit on government advisory bodies.

All candidates self-nominated for the list to demonstrate their dedication and willingness, along with their qualifications.

The list—compiled by the Zubin Foundation with global executive search firm Spencer Stuart—is an attempt to address the extreme underrepresentation of the city’s non-Chinese, non-white population on its consultation boards.

Just 0.4 per cent of such advisory board members are non-white ethnic minorities.

While he represents an ethnic minority, Sharif is eager to contribute in his area of expertise.

“Ethnic minority rights aren’t really my expertise,” he says. “I’d like to be on government advisory boards related to innovation and education ... that’s where I can contribute the most.”

The aim of the list is to have ethnic minorities considered not because of their race but because of their abilities to contribute to the discussion in their fields of expertise, and to add a dimension of cultural diversity to the mix.

The professor’s expertise may well come in use with Hong Kong’s newly established Innovation and Technology Bureau and the administration’s proclamation that it will focus its energy on developing the field.

Sharif criticises Hong Kong for being slow to jump on the innova-

tion bandwagon, attributing the city’s good fortune in having a “special position” with mainland China as the factor that enabled it to rest on its laurels.

“The China reliance has been both a blessing and a curse ... and in the long run, it did more damage than good to the city,” he says.

Hong Kong was able to expand its economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s by moving factories across the border, effectively cutting costs and allowing many local businessmen to make money, he says.

The city also developed an overreliance on the banking and finance sector—a traditionally strong area—as a safe investment portal for worldwide investors interested in China.

These developments meant there was little need to be creative and innovative.

“The advantage entrenched us in our old ways ... it was 30 more years of the same thing ... that Hongkongers are reluctant to change,” Sharif says.

Compared to South Korea which developed technology and related manufacturing; Taiwan which developed value-adding industries; and Singapore which developed biotechnology—all in the 1980s and 1990s, Hong Kong was very late among the “four Asian tigers,” he says.

The policymakers also stuck to what the city knew and never pushed for growth, nor to diversify the economy, he adds. The government did not look into investing in developing technology and high-value-adding industries until much later.

Sharif says there remains a small window where Hong Kong can develop its technology and innovation before the possibility of Beijing withdrawing its special treatment of the SAR as cities on the mainland overtake Hong Kong in economic importance.

NAUBAHAR SHARIF

Age: 43

Profession: associate professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (2005 - present)

Expertise: innovation and technology development; technology and society
Education: HKUST; Cornell University (PhD); Harvard University (executive education programme)



Hong Kong accounted for 19 per cent of China’s GDP back in 1997, but this dropped to just 2.6 per cent in 2014, he points out.

“I think we are losing bargaining power. The aim is that Hong Kong can be self-sufficient, stand on its own two legs [in terms of the economy].”

Part of that would be to develop the innovation and technology fields—and diversify the economy into value-adding industries.

Sharif himself chose to return to Hong Kong after his PhD despite having other offers at other schools, because of his attachment to his family and his identity as a Hongkonger.

Sharif’s father immigrated to Hong Kong in 1967, followed by his mother and older siblings a few years later. The family settled down in Hong Kong, while his father worked hard to build a successful trading business.

He completed his undergraduate and masters degrees at the University of Science and Technology, and went on to complete his doctorate at Cornell University in the United States.

Sharif went to international primary and secondary schools. He says he understood bits of Cantonese, but the real learning came at university, where he was forced to learn the language—which he did.

“I’m fluent conversationally, but I cannot read nor write Chinese,” he says.

The lack of choices for non-Chinese children to learn Chinese as a second language was a major problem from Sharif’s school days to today.

The professor and his wife had to go to great lengths to make sure their children had the opportunity to learn how to read and write traditional Chinese.

Language remains a major hurdle for ethnic minorities in both education and the workplace. There has been general criticism that government policies lack a multicultural perspective.

Having ethnic minorities on advisory boards will to an extent alter that, says Shalini Mahtani, founder of the Zubin Foundation, which compiled the diversity list.

The list is mainly made up of

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PROFESSOR NAUBAHAR SHARIF

Indians—due to the minority’s larger and more well-established community—while Sharif is one of two Pakistanis included.

“[The list] showcases suitable candidates which maybe the government haven’t been able to find on their own,” he says.

Sharif admits to a feeling of frustration with the media and society for labelling all ethnic minorities as poor, uneducated and helpless.

“Ideally, representation [of non-Chinese members on the boards] would be in sync [in ratio] to the population,” he says, on what prompted him to offer himself as a candidate.

“Part of being on those boards is also to be a visible role model for other ethnic minority youth—who as we all know, some are struggling.”

“Hong Kong for me—for better or worse—is my home.”