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A sentinel to good governance

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A sentinel to good governance

Mr S R Nathan has had a key hand in defining how the Elected Presidency should fulfil its functions



EUGENE K B TAN

Tonight President S R Nathan hands over office to his successor after serving 12 years as Singapore's Head of State.

At 87, he is the oldest person to fill that post and he is also the Republic's longest-serving President.

What is most visible to most people are the ceremonial trappings of the office. For example, foreign dignitaries call on him, ambassadors and high commissioners accredited to Singapore present their letters of credence to him, and he officiates at the National Day Parade and the opening of a new session of Parliament.

But not visible at all is the exercise of the Elected President's (EP) executive custodial powers. These matters of state are classified and covered under the Official Secrets Act and not even reported. Hence, it is no surprise that many view the Elected Presidency as a white elephant. Yet, it is most unfair.

As an institutional watchdog, the EP's worth lies in it being a silent sentinel to good governance. Like a home alarm

system, just because the alarm is not activated does not mean it has not served its purpose. In fact, its non-activation may point to the fact that the alarm has deterred intruders.

CONTEXT MATTERS

Many have tended to compare the presidency of Mr Nathan with his predecessor, the late Mr Ong Teng Cheong. The latter has been lionised for his well-known disagreements with the Government. No one had expected Mr Ong, who resigned as Deputy Prime Minister and People's Action Party chairman to contest in the first presidential polls, to clash with the Government.

As the first EP, Mr Ong had to work out a new relationship with the Government. The idea of the Head of State as a limited check and balance was alien at the time, and the government machinery took time to adjust to the new state of play. Mr Ong had to work out the rites of passage, so to speak, as the new watchdog.

When Mr Nathan assumed office in September 1999, the differences the Istana under President Ong had with the Government were being ironed out. This was facilitated when the Istana and the Government agreed on a 1999 White

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PHOTO BY DON WONG

Paper providing for the modalities with regards to determining and safeguarding the accumulated reserves.

This away-from-the-public-eye dialogue and engagement on establishing working norms, rules and guidelines between the Istana and the Government, helped to set the stage for a cooperative working relationship. The lesson here is that the lack of overt conflict between the Cabinet and the Istana should not be seen as the former being overbearing on the latter, or the latter being deferential to the former. Context matters.

SHAPING THE OFFICE

Given the apparent tense relationship between the Government and President Ong, which only came to public attention at the end of the latter's term, President Nathan's tenure has helped to put the relationship on an even keel.

In his 12 years, the Istana has helped developed the norms and accumulate valuable experience in the working of the EP institution. With the custodial functions of the EP fairly well established by now, Mr Nathan can take credit as a key hand in the development of the detailed rules and procedures to operationalise the office's functions.

The drawdown of past reserves in 2009, to help tide Singapore through its worst recession since independence, is a good case in point. It was Mr Nathan's decision in February 2009 to support the Government's decision to use our past reserves to fund the S\$4.9 billion needed for two special schemes, one to help save jobs and the other to ease credit for businesses.

This was an example of how the EP, as a check-and-balance institution, does not necessar-

ily detract from working with the Government for the common good.

President Nathan also initiated the President's Challenge in 2000 to encourage Singaporeans from all walks of life to help the less fortunate among us. This was initially a month-long campaign but it has now, in partnership with Singaporeans and the charity sector, become a year-long community-driven charity campaign. So far, it has raised more than S\$100 million for beneficiaries who range from needy children and families to the elderly and the disabled.

Mr Nathan's support for the teaching, social work and nursing professions is also an example of how the EP can use the influence of the Istana to provide much-needed recognition and encouragement to such groups.

THE LAST WORD

Unlike the courts which can explain its decisions through judgments, the EP has no such recourse. The office has been criticised, and some of the most strident and unfair criticisms were articulated during the Presidential Election. This is unfair not only to Mr Nathan but also the institution.

In his amicable manner, on July 1, when announcing his decision not to seek re-election, President Nathan said: "If I have fallen short, I would like the people of Singapore to know that this has not been for lack of effort or commitment. I have tried to do my best. No doubt I have earned my fair share of criticism. Anyone who takes on public responsibilities has to expect that."

"I have taken such comments — whether made directly or via social media — as made in good conscience, and well-intended." He did not choose to be overly defensive of his term. His to-be-published memoirs will help us have a better

understanding of the office.

Each President brings a different value proposition to the table, and each President operates within the context of his term. Mr Nathan certainly did not see his role as being that of a countervailing power to the Cabinet Executive — nor is that the role prescribed to the EP under the Constitution.

While he sought to see his role from the perspective of his constitutional responsibilities, Mr Nathan also ensured that the EP did not marginalise the fundamental purpose the institution is designed to serve: That of ensuring the sustainability of Singapore's good governance. He did so through his constructive relationship with the Cabinet.

President Nathan's track record of public service should inspire Singaporeans to step forward and serve.

In his own words: "Whatever the Constitution says about the powers of the Elected President, and however varied people's perceptions of the office may be, ultimately the welfare of our country and people depends upon the way Singapore is governed and administered... I believe that if those who serve in the Government or any other area of public administration meet the demands of their office to the best of their ability, and if they show wisdom and integrity in looking after the interests of Singapore, we can ask no more".

Certainly, through his long career as a social worker, civil servant, diplomat, Head of State and now, the head of a research institute, public service has been President Nathan's defining contribution. ■

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