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Is there a truly independent candidate?

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Is there a truly independent candidate?

This could be a key factor for voters in the Presidential Election — so how can hopefuls prove themselves?



EUGENE K BTAN

With three hopefuls confirming their intent to contest, Singaporeans can expect to vote in the fourth Presidential Election. If more than one candidate secures a Certificate of Eligibility from the Presidential Elections Committee, this would be the first contest since 1993.

This augurs well for the institution of the Elected President. Capable and dedicated Singaporeans should step forward without being prompted to by the Government or other interest groups. A contest will help Singaporeans gain a better understanding of the institution of the Elected President within our system of constitutional government.

That Messrs Tan Cheng Bock, Tony Tan Keng Yam and Tan Kin Lian have indicated their serious intent to run is a much welcomed change.

The political landscape today is very different from that 18 years ago. The electorate is more diverse and demanding, more questioning of political authority, and more open to political diversity and competition. The Internet was non-existent then. Further, this year's Presidential Election comes hot on the heels of a polarising May General Election.

It is possible that the strong ground sentiments, polarised political attitudes and emotions that characterised the GE would continue to feature in the background of the contest to elect Singapore's head of state.

Given that the People's Action Party still has a strong grip on Parliament with 93 per cent of the seats, some voters may wish to see someone independent be the Elected President operating as an alternative centre of power. This is not desirable, since the Elected President is constitutionally required to be non-partisan.

The Presidential Election should not

be construed as a proxy political contest. Indeed, we are unlikely to see a contest framed in "what I will do, what policies I will pursue, how will I check the Government if elected" terms, since what the President can do is well-defined in the Singapore Constitution.

It bears remembering that the transformation of the Presidency has not detracted from the fact that ours remains a parliamentary system of government in which executive power resides with the Cabinet. The Elected President simply provides an additional layer of check and balance, where it did not exist previously, in defined areas.

THE THREE CANDIDATES

Pundits have put former PAP Chairman and Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan as the frontrunner. But we still have almost two months to go before the polls are likely to be held and campaign process still offers the opportunity to mould public opinion and persuade voters.

It is no surprise that Dr Tony Tan has — and will continue — to emphasise his independence. Of the three likely candidates, he is most closely identified with the ruling party.

In announcing his bid on Thursday, Dr Tony Tan was at pains to preemptively allay concerns regarding his independence. He is also indicating that he is fully alive to the need for the Elected President not only to be independent but to be seen to be independent as well.

Yet, even without the Government's tacit or express endorsement, the reality is that Dr Tony Tan is widely seen as the Government's preferred candidate. It is something he will have to grapple with going into the campaign.

I believe that is why he stated upfront that he is not seeking endorsement from any party, but that should any sector of society offer backing, he would welcome it. The question may be, can Dr Tony Tan turn his close affiliation with the PAP-dominated establishment into an advantage?

It is no surprise that Dr Tony Tan has — and will continue — to emphasise his independence. Indeed, independence has become a prominent theme in the lead-up to the presidential election. All three hopefuls had a PAP background.

Indeed, independence has become a prominent theme in the lead-up to the presidential election. All three hopefuls have a PAP background.

Dr Tan Cheng Bock was a well-liked and outspoken veteran PAP MP. Mr Tan Kin Lian, the former NTUC Income CEO, was also a former PAP branch secretary. In the May GE, Mr Tan spoke at the rallies of the National Solidarity Party and the Singapore Democratic Party. So Mr Tan also has his work cut out on this front.

TO ENDORSE OR NOT?

Should the Government and/or NTUC come out and endorse their preferred candidate? I believe the Government and NTUC will tread carefully and closely monitor ground sentiments before making a move.

Given that there remains residual unhappiness from the GE, a candidate endorsed by the Government and/or NTUC may be perceived in some quarters to be less independent than the other candidates. A Government "blessing" could end up being a kiss of political death.

Even if the Government sticks to its past practice of endorsing a candidate, it will have to carefully consider how that may affect the prospects of its preferred candidate. Other considerations would include when to make the endorsement (at the start of the campaign as in the past, or mid-way or at the tail-end?) and how (tacit or overt?) to express the preference. Context matters.

It may also be that the endorsements have little effect on how Singaporeans vote.

The signalling effect of top-down endorsements today is less prominent than it was two decades ago. The electoral process demands that Singaporeans exercise their independent judgement on who will be best placed to serve the nation as its head of state.

It may well be that a hands-off approach by potential endorsers might work out better for the candidates. There will be other concrete ways of supporting and campaigning for their preferred candidates.

CONNECTING WITH VOTERS

Will the pro-Establishment vote be split between the two Dr Tans if there is a three-cornered fight? It is highly possible since Dr Tony Tan and Dr Tan Cheng Bock appeal to different segments of that voting bloc.

Or will this voting bloc throw their support behind the Dr Tan whom they think is more likely to win, in order not to allow the third candidate to be elected?

How will the candidates campaign? There is already the active use of the Internet and social media platforms since this enables ease of access between the candidate and the 2 million voters, in particular many Gen Y voters who are digital natives.

The candidates will also have to reach out to the electorate in person. This will be the crucial part of the campaigning — engaging Singaporeans face-to-face, connecting with them in a way that online platforms cannot, and securing their support.

In this regard, the message they put forth is vital. Candidates have a duty not to over-promise what they plan to do if elected.

We should expect the Presidential Election campaign to be qualitatively different from the parliamentary elections — it is not about policies or ideologies. It is a contest for the highest — and non-partisan — office in Singapore. As such, candidates and voters alike must endeavour to keep to the spirit of the office. ■

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