

## Presidential election a referendum on PAP

**Santha Oorjitham**

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Singapore's presidential election this month is likely to be a report card on what the PAP has done since the general election. SANTHA OORJITHAM finds out more from politicians and observers

Aug 17 is both nomination day for Singapore's presidential election and the 100th day after its general election.

If there's a contest on Aug 27, it would also be the first time Singaporeans get to cast their vote twice in a year.

The aftermath of the parliamentary polls may yet influence this presidential election, right down to whether or not there is a walkover.

On May 7, the ruling People's Action Party's share of the popular vote dropped from 66.6 per cent (in the 2006 general election) to 60.1 per cent. The opposition also gained a group representation constituency (GRC) for the first time when the Workers' Party won in Aljunied.

Workers' Party chairman, Sylvia Lim, sees "some carry-over of the politicisation of voters from the general election to the presidential election. People appear to be in the mood to exercise their political rights, which may reflect a certain pent-up frustration due to the highly regulated nature of our society".

The presidential election may well become a straight referendum on the PAP, predicts former nominated member of parliament Siew Kum Hong.

"The people's perceptions on the PAP's performance since GE2011 would play a key role in determining how they vote."

But would there be a contest?

Eugene Tan, assistant professor of law at Singapore Management University, notes that there are now not only more "hopefuls" but also that they are "very likely to meet the stringent pre-qualification requirements".

Although not officially endorsed by the PAP, former deputy prime minister Dr Tony Tan is the party's preferred candidate. In June, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said Tan would be a "unifying figure for all citizens" and would bring "honour and credit" to the country if elected.

The first presidential election in 1993 saw the only contest -- between former deputy premier Ong Teng Cheong (who won) and former accountant-general Chua Kim Yeow. Since then, there have been walkovers, with only one candidate qualifying for the certificate of eligibility from the Presidential Elections Committee each time.

This year, former PAP member of parliament, Dr Tan Cheng Bock, and former NTUC Income chief executive officer (and former PAP grassroots leader) Tan Kin Lian have announced their plans to contest.

So did former prime minister Goh Chok Tong's former principal private secretary Tan Jee Say (who led the Singapore Democratic Party team contesting the Holland-Bukit Timah GRC in May, unsuccessfully) and former Jurong Town Corporation chief financial officer Andrew Kuan, who attempted to contest incumbent president S.R. Nathan's re-election bid in 2005 but failed to qualify.

According to the Constitution, a candidate must have held office for not less than three years in a position of seniority or responsibility in the public or private sector -- such as a minister, chief justice, speaker, attorney-general or the chairman or CEO of a company with paid-up capital of at least S\$100 million (RM246.7 million) or its equivalent in foreign currency.

"Our concern should not be to limit qualification to only a select group of candidates... but rather to enable good candidates to step forth and proffer themselves to the people so that they can exercise an informed choice," said Jee Say after applying for a certificate of eligibility.

Pundits predict that up to three other candidates besides Dr Tony Tan could qualify.

"The worst outcome for PAP would be a no-contest situation," warns a former senior civil servant, "because people would be upset that nothing had changed, that there was no response to the new political consciousness."

In fact, some believe the PAP's speedy response to the polls outcome was partly in preparation for the presidential polls.

The prime minister announced a major cabinet reshuffle and accepted the resignations of senior ministers, set up a committee to review ministerial salaries and began to tackle concerns such as the cost and availability of housing and the impact of the growing number of foreign workers on public infrastructure.

"The attempts by the government since the May 7 general election to address Singaporeans' concerns, angst and anger will help avoid making the presidential election a proxy general election or a by-election," reckons Eugene Tan.

On the hustings in May, oppositionists claimed that a stronger presence for them in Parliament would ensure more checks and balances.

Some of the potential candidates for the presidential election have promised to play a similar role, since the president has custodial powers over Singapore's reserves and key appointments.

He is the "second key to unlocking reserves, in confirming key appointments to the state and three other points to do with integrity of the public service, detentions under the Internal Security Act, and religious harmony", explains Gillian Koh, senior research fellow with the Institute of Policy Studies.

In a press statement after submitting his application for a certificate of eligibility, Cheng Bock recounted instances when he went against the PAP whip.

"If I see Singaporean interest compromised, I will make a stand. When I see something is wrong, I will tell you."

Kin Lian says on his blog that his campaign slogan is "to be the voice of the people, to be independent of the PAP government and to use my knowledge to safeguard the Central Provident Fund savings of the people and the national reserves".

Candidates are distancing themselves from the PAP, says a young consultant, "because the mood now is that people want independence and the candidates think being linked to the PAP would be detrimental to their chances".

But Eugene Tan points out that 60 per cent of the popular votes went to the PAP in May. A PAP background is still a "cachet and a plus", he says, "provided the candidate is able to demonstrate his ability to act in the best interest of Singapore and Singaporeans without fear or favour".