

Let electoral college choose the president

Ho Kwon Ping & Janadas Devan
The Straits Times, 3 September 2011

The Presidential Election

The Aug 27 Presidential election was the most keenly contested ever with four candidates; and won narrowly with 35.2 per cent by Dr Tony Tan, who was sworn in on Thursday. We present here views on the election, including a call to do away with direct voting of a president in the first place.

THE means employed should be commensurate with the ends desired. If the end is an apolitical presidency, then the means Singapore employs in choosing the president must themselves be apolitical.

This year's presidential election was anything but that. Instead, it was a divisive and highly politicised affair. Two words describe its outcome: confused and unfortunate.

Confused because the victor, though accepted by the majority of Singaporeans as eminently qualified to hold

the office, emerged from the election with no clear mandate. His presidency began amid suggestions that if one or the other of the two worst losers - Mr Tan Jee Say or Mr Tan Kin Lian - had not contested, Singapore would on Thursday have probably inaugurated President Tan Cheng Bock, not President Tony Tan.

Confused also because at least a quarter of the voters saw the presidential election as a re-run of the past general election. They voted for a former opposition candidate, Mr Tan Jee Say, who felt that the president need not be 'restricted' by the Constitution, and should act as a 'check and balance' on the Government and Parliament.

Confused too because a sizeable number voted for anybody but Dr Tony Tan because they were frustrated with the first-past-the-post system, which saw opposition parties receive 40 per cent of the votes in the last general election but less than 7 per cent of the parliamentary seats. They saw the presidential election as an opportunity to correct an anomaly in the general election.

Unfortunate because the race ended up diminishing somewhat two distinguished men - Dr Tony Tan and Dr Tan Cheng Bock - who have devoted the best part of their lives to public service. While the victory of one Dr Tan has been diminished by his wafer-thin margin, the near-victory of the other has been overshadowed by his failure to achieve his long-held dream.

Unfortunate also because the only clear political winner in the race was Mr Tan Jee Say. He saw what the framers of the constitutional provisions establishing the elected presidency perhaps did not: You cannot hold an election for an apolitical office and not expect politics to intrude.

Mr Tan grasped that the race for the presidency could be politicised. He saw in the presidential campaign an opportunity to extend the campaign he had launched in the May General Election. And he made himself a household name - perhaps better known now than his erstwhile party boss, Dr Chee Soon Juan, and perhaps as well known as the de facto leader of the opposition, Mr Low Thia Khiang.

If Mr Tan wishes to set up his own party now, his campaign for the presidency has equipped him with the wherewithal to do so.

So the only candidate who benefited politically from this race is someone who will be able to further his political ambition in the next general election. Whether or not he set out with this objective in mind, this fact will surely not be lost on other politically ambitious persons among those currently eligible to run for president - a class commodious enough to include Mr Tan. What can Singaporeans expect from future presidential elections as they are currently constituted?

Depending on the calendar, each presidential election will either be a curtain-raiser for a general election or a continuation of one. The primacy of Parliament as the arena of political debate will be diminished, and the dignity of the presidency will be tarnished. The apolitical presidency will become the pursuit of politics by other means - to the detriment of both politics and the presidency.

Few, if any, minority candidates will be able to win a presidential race. As one commentator on the Internet put it, the GRC system was devised because Parliament realised that a system consisting only of single-seat constituencies may well result in a single-race Parliament. Ironically, the presidential election is in effect a giant single-seat race - and what is more, was, in the last election, a single-race affair. Former president S R Nathan may well have been our last minority president for a very long time.

Few, if any, people with a reputation for personal integrity and fiscal prudence but zero political experience will be willing to subject themselves to the politicking that Singapore has just witnessed. It is unlikely that individuals like Mr Chua Kim Yeow, the former accountant-general who offered himself as a presidential candidate in 1993 - or any other eminent elder, whether previously from the civil service, business or civil society - will come forward in 2017.

Few, if any, candidates without prior political party affiliation - and with the requisite experience, resources and organisation to run a campaign - will come forward. It will only be politicians from now on at the Istana.

How might the system be reformed?

One way would be to return to Parliament the right to elect the president. Numerous democracies in the Commonwealth do so, as did Singapore before 1993.

The disadvantage of that is that Parliament would be choosing the very same person whose chief role would be to act as a check on it and the Government in certain key areas - in particular, the use of past reserves and crucial public sector appointments.

Another possibility that we would urge Singaporeans to consider is this: Establish an electoral college to nominate the presidential candidates and elect one from among them.

The college could be large to ensure it is representative - say 50 to 100 people. It could comprise representatives of major stakeholders in Singapore: unions, business federations, combined university student groups, civil society organisations, ethnic self-help groups, political parties with parliamentary seats, and so on. The electors could be chosen by processes to be determined by each stakeholder group.

The college could nominate three or four candidates from among those who offer themselves for the presidency.

We are agnostic on the eligibility criteria - with one of us feeling the current requirements should be tightened further and the other that they should be liberalised. Whatever it is, the electoral college should be the first sieve, and either the Supreme Court or the Public Service Commission might be given the right of final approval as an additional safeguard to ensure that only people of integrity run for the presidency.

The shortlisted candidates could be allowed to give short television addresses, be interviewed by the media, do walkabouts - but not hold rallies. In the natural course of things, the media, including social media, would have lots to say about the candidates, all of which the electors could monitor as reflective of the views of the community.

The electoral college might also interview each candidate in depth. After which, it might vote by secret ballot - in three rounds if necessary, with the weakest candidate in each round being eliminated, till only one candidate emerges with more than 50 per cent of the votes.

Politics is vital - but it should also be productive. What we saw in the last presidential election was politics for politics' sake, since none of the candidates who promised to do this or that once in office could possibly have carried out his promises, given the non-executive nature of the office.

Politics should be solely vested where it rightly belongs - in Parliament. If our aim is an apolitical and impartial president, our means for choosing one should be commensurate with that aim. It is not possible in either politics or ethics for bad means to produce good ends.

Ho Kwon Ping is chairman of the board of trustees of Singapore Management University and executive chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings.

Janadas Devan is associate editor of The Straits Times and director of the Institute of Policy Studies.