

Demystifying the presidential office

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NOW that the general election is behind us, the Singapore electorate is getting ready for another election.

The president's term expires on Aug 31. An election will therefore have to be held to elect a new president before the end of August. In this essay, I hope to demystify the office of the president and discuss some of his roles, functions and powers.

First, the president is the head of the state of Singapore. He occupies the same position as the British queen, the Malaysian king, and the Indian president - but with enhanced powers. The president is not the head of government, who is the prime minister. The president is the symbol of the country.

The reason the Constitution requires that the president belong to no political party is that he should be non-partisan and above party politics. The president should be a person who can command the support of all our ethnic and religious groups. He should, therefore, not be viewed as a chauvinist or a person who is not open to inter-faith dialogue and harmony. Under no circumstance should the office be politicised.

The president should also be able to bridge our social and economic classes. He should be admired by the poor as well as the rich, and everyone else in between. In other words, the president should be a person who can unite our nation and be a symbol of our national unity. Second, the president plays an important diplomatic role. It would not be wrong to call him Singapore's No. 1 diplomat.

All the ambassadors and high commissioners accredited to Singapore present their credentials to the president. Visiting foreign leaders normally request to call on the president, which is the universal diplomatic protocol observed by states in their relations with one another. In addition, the president can assist the prime minister and the foreign minister in expanding and deepening Singapore's external relations.

In carrying out this role, I should clarify that the president does not pursue an independent foreign policy. He has no such power. The president has to act in accordance with the advice of the Cabinet in his dealings with foreign leaders and their governments.

However, given his high status, the president can add value by undertaking visits to selected countries. These trips are not undertaken for the president's pleasure. They are carefully prepared for and undertaken only if there are key deliverables. They help to expand Singapore's economic and political space.

The president, thus, plays an important diplomatic role. Ideally, he should be knowledgeable about the world, temperamentally tactful and able to hold his own in his interactions with foreign leaders.

Third, the president can and should use the soft power of his office to champion good causes. Each president has championed causes close to his heart.

President Wee Kim Wee, who was a badminton champion in his younger days, championed sports and volunteerism. President Ong Teng Cheong championed culture and the arts, especially, music. In President SR Nathan's case, it is the poor, the needy and the disabled that he has championed.

President Nathan studied social studies in university and began his career as a social worker. Mrs Nathan taught in a school for the blind. As a result, both of them wished to do something in this area.

Eleven years ago, President Nathan launched the President's Challenge, in cooperation with the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports and the National Council of Social Service. To date, more than \$100 million has been raised, benefiting hundreds of charities and thousands of our poor, needy and disabled.

In addition, President Nathan has been tireless in helping the Community Chest and various other charities in their fund- raising activities. We must hope that the next president will also use the soft power of his office to champion good causes close to his heart and thereby help to build a better and more inclusive Singapore.

Fourth, the president is vested with executive power in five specific areas:

- He has the power to veto a proposal by the Government to spend the state's past reserves. The surpluses earned by the Government during its term of office are added to the accumulated reserves of the past, and locked away.

If, for example, a government that has just been sworn into office wishes to spend part of the surpluses accumulated during the previous five years, the president can say 'no'.

- Similarly, the Constitution empowers the president to veto the proposed appointment of individuals to certain key positions in the public sector. The president can also veto a proposal by the Government to remove an individual from such a key position.

The president's power in these two areas is a negative power. He can veto a Budget that proposes to spend part of the reserves, but he has no power to suggest how the reserves should be managed or to suggest an alternative Budget. Similarly, he can veto an appointment, but he cannot suggest an alternative candidate.

In exercising his veto powers, the president is required to consult the six wise people in the Council of Presidential Advisers (CPA). The president appoints two members of the CPA, including the chairman; the prime minister appoints two; and the Chief Justice and the chairman of the Public Service Commission appoint one each.

The current chairman of the council is Mr J. Y. Pillay. The other members are: Mr S. Dhanabalan, Mr Po'ad Shaik Abu Bakar Mattar, Mr Yong Pung How, Mr Goh Joon Seng and Mr Bobby Chin. Mr Lim Chee Onn and Mr Stephen Lee are the two alternate members.

The council meets monthly and advises the president on matters relating to the Budget and key public sector appointments. If the president's veto has the support of a majority of the members of the council, the veto is final. However, if the president's veto is not supported by such a majority, it can be overridden by a two-thirds majority vote in Parliament.

In choosing the next president, we should avoid choosing a person who is eager to pick a fight with the Government. In a president, we need a person possessed of equanimity, who is deliberate and calm, deeply experienced and wise. At the same time, we do not want a person who lacks the courage of his conviction or who has no convictions.

The president must not be reckless. However, if the prime minister were to propose appointing an unqualified person to be the next Chief Justice, for example, we would like the president to have the courage to veto the appointment.

The president has been vested with executive powers in three other areas. In exercising his powers in these areas, the president is not obliged to consult the CPA:

- If the advisory committee under the Internal Security Act advises that a political detainee be released and the Government disagrees, the president can order that the detainee be released.
- If the prime minister refuses to give permission to the director of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) to continue with his investigation of an individual, the president can overrule the prime minister and allow the CPIB to carry on with its investigation.
- Under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, the Government can issue a restraining order against a person deemed to be acting contrary to the maintenance of religious harmony. However, if the Cabinet's decision is opposed by the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, the president is empowered to overrule the Cabinet.

I hope I have added clarity to the roles, functions and powers of the president. It would not be wrong to say that our president is the guardian of two of our country's core interests as they pertain to our reserves and the integrity of our public service.

In good times, his role is to maintain an 'informed watchfulness' in these areas, as Ms Lydia Lim of this newspaper put it recently. However, if things go wrong, we should be able to turn to our president to protect us from the depredations of a rogue government.

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