

Endorsements 'won't have major impact' **Voting blocs are not a feature of Singapore politics, say observers**

Rachel Chang
The Straits Times, 23 August 2011

Presidential candidates and political observers said yesterday that endorsements from organisations or societies will not be game-changers in this election.

The four candidates said Singaporeans were 'discerning' voters and would 'follow their hearts' at the Aug 27 election rather than an organisational line.

In fact, all four said that they did not actively lobby or seek out endorsements.

Analysts also argued that the impact of endorsements is limited due to the absence of voting blocs in modern Singapore politics.

As one put it, trade unions today are a far cry from those in Singapore's earlier decades, which were more active in politics as well as more homogeneous in membership. Trade unions then could make or break election candidates.

In this presidential election, more organisations than ever before have entered the endorsement game.

Although the unions and business groups have endorsed candidates in the past, it is the first time that clan associations and even a sports group are getting into the fray.

Former deputy prime minister Tony Tan has garnered the lion's share, with three-quarters of the unions affiliated to the National Trades Union Congress having endorsed him.

He has also been endorsed by the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA), and various Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

'I'm very grateful to them but of course it's up to each Singaporean to decide how to cast his or her vote,' Dr Tan said yesterday.

The three other candidates said they did not think their lack of endorsements in comparison would hurt their chances at the polls.

Dr Tan Cheng Bock, who has been endorsed by the Singapore Baseball and Softball Association, said that 'at the end of the day I want Singaporeans to endorse me. That will be a better endorsement.'

Political endorsements in Singapore are tricky territory. The Trade Unions Act, for example, prohibits union funds from being used for any political activity.

Labour chief Lim Swee Say said yesterday that union leaders can endorse candidates as long as union funds are not used in their campaigns.

The constitutions of other groups are stricter: for example, the Singapore Manufacturers' Federation stopped short of an overt endorsement of Dr Tan, despite a glowing assessment of him by its president.

The Straits Times understands that leaders must call an annual general meeting to agree on an endorsement before it can be made.

Other groups interpret their rules less strictly. The Baseball and Softball Association's constitution, for example, prohibits the group from participating in 'partisan politics'.

But the society's president, Mr Nelson Goh, 40, argued that the office of the president is non-partisan.

Local racial and religious groups, which would arguably have sway over more voters, stay far away from politics.

The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, for example, is a statutory board and therefore strictly apolitical.

Endorsements are not binding on members, at the ballot box or otherwise. For example, the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, whose president Chua Thian Poh was Dr Tony Tan's proposer, endorsed Dr Tan last week.

But the Hainan Tan Clan Association and the Singapore Foo Chow Association, both members of the federation, have hosted Dr Tan's opponents in recent days - Mr Tan Jee Say and Mr Tan Kin Lian respectively.

One area in which endorsements are useful, notes Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh, is in mobilising manpower for the candidate.

'They do provide some guarantee of support and resources during the hustings,' she notes.

The SFCCA, for example, filled three busloads of supporters for Dr Tony Tan on Nomination Day.

Endorsements are also a two-way relationship, argues Dr Terence Chong of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Endorsing organisations hope that the public show of support will build social capital which they can draw on if and when their chosen candidate takes office.

'The candidate gets the benefit of public affirmation, and the endorser gets to show his or her loyalty.'

Additional reporting by Andrea Ong, Cai Haoxiang, Tessa Wong and Teo Wan Gek