

Feelers put out asking me to step aside, says Kin Lian Jee Say and Cheng Bock deny any such bids to avert four-way fight

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A last-ditch attempt was made before Nomination Day to prevent a four-cornered fight in the presidential race. It failed.

Mr Tan Kin Lian disclosed yesterday that he had received 'feelers' up till Tuesday night - the night before Nomination Day - proposing that he step aside for the sake of unity among the non-establishment forces.

These, he said, came 'not from the candidates themselves, but from their supporters'.

'But since I already made up my mind a few days ago and I made a statement (to that effect), I will not reconsider,' Mr Tan told reporters at his house before leaving for the Nomination Centre.

Following Mr Tan's disclosure, both Dr Tan Cheng Bock and Mr Tan Jee Say denied sending out such feelers.

Dr Tan Cheng Bock said they did not come from him nor his campaign team: 'I've never spoken to anybody and nobody has spoken to me.'

Mr Tan Jee Say said his campaign did not send out feelers either. There was a group of people unaffiliated with any campaign, he said, who had been urging the three Tans to sit down together, and possibly draw lots to decide who should remain in the race.

Yesterday, Mr Tan Jee Say's friend and former Singapore Democratic Party comrade Ang Yong Guan told The Straits Times that last Saturday, he had asked his friend to consider backing out.

'I still think it would have been best if Jee Say and Tan Kin Lian had dropped out of the race to form a unified front with Tan Cheng Bock at the head,' said Dr Ang.

Mr Tan Kin Lian said he had earlier kept an open mind about unity talks, but decided to go ahead and run after both Dr Tan Cheng Bock and Mr Tan Jee Say made statements in the press ruling out the possibility of not standing.

A close campaign aide told The Straits Times that the turning point was when Mr Tan Jee Say unexpectedly received the eligibility certificate, as one more candidate in the equation made it near impossible to reach consensus.

Analysts said another reason the four-cornered fight was difficult to avoid was the absence of horse-trading, a fairly common practice elsewhere, under which candidates agree not to stand in exchange for appointments or favours later.

Said Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies: 'It's not a part of our political system, either in parliamentary or presidential elections. So it's likely that the candidate who steps down will have nothing to gain in return.'

Observers added that there were two likely scenarios that could emerge before Polling Day. If one of the trio - Dr Tan Cheng Bock, Mr Tan Kin Lian or Mr Tan Jee Say - emerges during the campaign as the perceived strongest candidate to challenge Dr Tony Tan, supporters of the other two might swing strategically to that candidate on Polling Day. Otherwise, the votes might stay split.

Said political analyst Alex Au: 'What could trigger tactical voting is either one candidate performing outstandingly over the next few days, at his rally and the TV forum, or another candidate making bad mistakes.'

Additional reporting by Hoe Pei Shan, Tessa Wong and Andrea Ong