

Much depends on who is cleared to run, say observers

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The coming presidential race will be a game-changer for the young institution, but the shape of the campaign will still depend on who is deemed eligible to run, said observers yesterday.

And while a 'general election hang-over' will impact the race, voters are likely to choose their president for reasons beyond policy or governance matters.

A simple emotional affinity for a candidate, analysts say, will go far in picking a figure whose most important responsibility is non-executive: to be a non-partisan, unifying figure for the country.

Even before the writ of election was issued yesterday, the sheer number of contestants who have come forward convinced observers that the elected presidency had reached a turning point in its short history. The last time the office was contested was in 1993.

'It's clear that there are more people willing to put themselves forward,' said Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh. 'But technically, we have to wait for the committee to come back on who will qualify as a candidate.'

The three-member Presidential Elections Committee (PEC) will issue or deny certificates of eligibility by the day before Nomination Day, Aug 17.

Veteran MP Charles Chong said that it is still possible the committee may use a strict reading of the eligibility criteria and deem only former deputy prime minister Tony Tan fit to run.

Three other candidates – former NTUC Income chief Tan Kin Lian, investment adviser Tan Jee Say and former JTC Corporation group chief financial officer Andrew Kuan - believe they qualify under a 'special clause'.

This stipulates that a candidate can be eligible if they have held an 'equivalent position' to that of a chairman or chief executive of a company with a paid-up capital of at least \$100 million.

The fifth hopeful, former MP Tan Cheng Bock, is chairman of Chuan Hup Holdings, which has paid-up capital of more than \$100 million. But he is a non-executive chairman and the law is silent on whether that matters.

But most view it unlikely that only one certificate of eligibility will be issued.

'My sense is that a majority of voters would expect an election to take place, and they would be upset - some would even cry foul - if there isn't one,' noted National University of Singapore associate professor Tan Ern Ser.

Unless there is a walkover, the contest is likely to be a heated, personal one in part due to the 'stress of the GE', said Sembawang GRC MP Ellen Lee.

The impact of the May General Election, during which partisan rivalry and rhetoric reached fever pitch, also explains why the candidates have all tried to trumpet their 'independence' from the PAP-led Government, she said.

Four of the five were previously People's Action Party members. The fifth, Mr Tan Jee Say, used to be from the opposition Singapore Democratic Party.

Ms Lee hopes the contest will not be 'personal' and 'vindictive'. 'We are going to elect a man to represent the whole of Singapore in international circles. We cannot have someone with too much mud slung in his face, because it will affect his standing after he is elected.'

Political watcher Derek da Cunha cautioned that candidates need to be clear that they are running for an 'elected presidency', not a 'politicised presidency'.

'Ceremonial duties take up the bulk of the role of the elected president,' he said. 'The potential candidates should ask themselves whether they can carry out their duties with appropriate dignity and sobriety. They should be above the fray and be seen to be above the fray.'

The system of issuing certificates of eligibility implies that all candidates meet a certain threshold of competency. Therefore, the strength of their past qualifications should theoretically become moot.

'They would be trying to appeal to the public in terms of what they represent of the Singapore identity, spirit and value system,' Dr Koh noted.

Mr Chong pointed out that the next president is unlikely to be elected with an overwhelming majority.

In 1993, retired accountant-general Chua Kim Yeow's status as 'not the Government-endorsed candidate' was enough to win him 41 per cent of the vote, despite a lacklustre campaign.

With so many candidates now in the field, voters will be even more split. 'If it's a three-candidate race, someone may lose his deposit,' Mr Chong said. 'There won't be a landslide victory.'