

President's Challenge

Singapore has seen just two presidential campaigns - the first in 1993, the second last month. Such campaigns are a huge logistical undertaking. How did the four candidates in this year's race rise to the challenge?

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Less than 24 hours after hawker association chairman Ng Yong Wah welcomed one presidential candidate to West Coast Hawker Centre, he was back at the same kerb, waiting for another.

The hawker centre, famous for its fishball noodle and wonton mee stalls, was on the campaign itineraries of both Dr Tony Tan and Dr Tan Cheng Bock on consecutive days.

Mr Ng or his deputy would act as the 'opener' for both men, announcing them to diners and guiding them through the hawker centre and adjoining wet market.

'If they want to come, we have to welcome them,' he said, with a shrug, of his double duty.

On Saturday, when Dr Tony Tan visited, Mr Ng was among a large group of grassroots leaders and People's Action Party (PAP) activists from West Coast constituency. Dr Tan arrived in a car with an aide.

On Sunday, when Dr Tan Cheng Bock swung by, Mr Ng waited with a much smaller group of five volunteers from the campaign. But Dr Tan arrived with a busload of more than 20 supporters, who chanted and carried flags.

The two visits were a study in how the front runners of the 2011 Presidential Election ran their campaigns.

While Dr Tony Tan's core team was a lean unit of family and friends, mostly uninvolved in party politics, he could count on help from the PAP and People's Association ground network at each heartland stop.

In contrast, Dr Tan Cheng Bock relied on a core team of experienced campaigners, many of whom were PAP activists who had been with him since his first election in Ayer Rajah in 1980, and could pull out a political trick or two.

Neither man was new to the hustings. But it would be the first time they, and the other two candidates, Mr Tan Jee Say and Mr Tan Kin Lian, faced down the daunting prospect of a nationwide campaign.

Unlike in a general election, where the territory to cover is marked off and group representation constituency teammates share the burden, the presidential candidates - the youngest at 57, the oldest two at 71 - had to cover as much ground as they could on their own.

Besides up to six walkabouts a day, they juggled frequent media interviews, attended two joint forums, taped two TV broadcasts, and planned and executed one large-scale rally each.

They had to reach out to Singaporeans from all walks of life, living in all four corners of the island. That meant campaigning the traditional way - walking the ground, shaking hands and carrying babies - as well as covering their new media bases through constant [Facebook](#) and blog updates, not to mention tweets.

With the help of their campaign teams, they also had to mobilise thousands of volunteers, including more than 800 counting agents to dispatch to counting stations on Polling Night.

With 2.27 million voters to court and an entire island to cover, they were in uncharted territory.

The logistics

Each candidate was allowed to spend a maximum of \$680,000 on the nine days at the hustings.

Although they were reluctant to reveal exact figures, The Straits Times understands that both Dr Tans raised and spent close to the limit. Mr Tan Jee Say spent over \$100,000 and Mr Tan Kin Lian about \$70,000.

The financial resources clearly gave both Dr Tans an edge.

Dr Tan Cheng Bock sent a four-page brochure to every household.

Dr Tony Tan bought ad space on [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and [Google](#). He also printed the maximum number of posters allowed, 9,400, and they went up overnight, after the official start of the campaign on Nomination Day.

The front runners were clearly the most prepared for the pace and scale of the campaign, although cracks showed from time to time.

Dr Tan Cheng Bock's campaign hired a bus for all nine days on the campaign trail, ensuring that morale remained high as the team travelled from stop to stop together in air-conditioned comfort.

Dr Tan would always take the window seat in the second row, buffered from the outside by long-time grassroots leader Bernard Chia, his campaign manager. He would wipe his face down and nap during the journey.

Dr Tony Tan travelled alone or with one other campaign aide between stops. 'He uses the journey to centre himself,' explained his press secretary for the campaign, Ms Jennifer Lewis.

Unlike Dr Tan Cheng Bock, Dr Tony Tan was supported by a different group at each stop. They were party activists and grassroots volunteers of the area he was visiting, whose familiar faces made receptions warmer among residents and shopowners.

A group of about 10 unionists from the Singapore [Sembawang Shipyard](#) Employees' Union, which Dr Tan was adviser to from 1979 to 2008, also took time off from work to support him on the campaign trail.

While there was no obligation to support his campaign, sources said leaders of PAP branches were asked to help coordinate Dr Tony Tan's campaign stops in their constituencies, and marshal resources such as counting agents for Polling Day.

But it was made clear by party brass that activists should come forward on a voluntary basis, and some did not bother to hide their preference for the other PAP man - Dr Tan Cheng Bock.

One branch secretary asked activists who had been counting agents at the May General Election to reprise their roles for the presidential election, but about 40 per cent declined, he said.

'They told me that they wanted to remain neutral and not support any candidate,' he said. 'But it was clear to me that they were going to vote for Tan Cheng Bock.'

Mr Tan Jee Say and Mr Tan Kin Lian both relied on disparate teams drawn from different walks of life and political affiliations, but of the two, Mr Tan Jee Say's was the bigger and more experienced operation. His campaign team included some of those who helped him during the May polls, when he stood as a Singapore Democratic Party candidate in Holland-Bukit Timah GRC.

On walkabouts, his 'opener' was either Mr Patrick Loke, a private school owner who was a Workers' Party volunteer during the general election, or opposition veteran Steve Chia, a National Solidarity Party member who has contested four elections.

Both were on top of any possible trouble. When Mr Tan's entourage went into a [McDonald's](#) in Causeway Point to shake hands with diners, Mr Chia hung back to soothe the feathers of the displeased manager, who said that it was against policy to allow politicians inside the restaurant.

'Sorry, the staff asked us in. Do you want us to leave now?' said Mr Chia, contrite and calm.

'It's okay, since he's almost done,' said the manager, softening at the olive branch.

The gaffes

That was in stark contrast to the reception Mr Tan Kin Lian and his volunteers received in shopping malls.

On the first day of campaigning, they were chased out of Raffles City Shopping Centre by 20 security guards. The next day, they were prevented by Ang Mo Kio Hub management from giving out fliers on the premises.

Each time, supporters would argue with the guards, causing scenes. Such incidents revealed Mr Tan and his team's total lack of experience in campaigning, and doomed his operation to be the most gaffe-prone of the four.

Aware that he was the least well-known in a crowded field, Mr Tan Kin Lian and his team wanted to cover as much ground as possible during the nine days. But having never been involved in a political campaign before, neither he nor his aides seemed to realise how punishing the pace would be.

There was also no clear chain of authority. When a Lianhe Zaobao journalist called his campaign manager Anthony Chia for a response to Dr Tan Cheng Bock's suggestion to move the Prime Minister's Office out of the Istana, he gave them a stand completely different from the one Mr Tan Kin Lian himself took at a closed-door forum the night before.

The other three campaigns also met with hiccups. Dr Tan Cheng Bock's schedule was 'fluid', to quote his press secretary Philip Law. He would stay longer at stops where the reception was warm, leave quickly where it was not, and make unplanned stops for nebulous reasons such as 'people want him to come'.

Away from the well-oiled grassroots machinery in the heartland, Dr Tony Tan's campaign also fumbled from time to time.

At a dialogue with social entrepreneurs at Professor Brawn cafe in Novena Square, the sound system did not work, leading to chaos.

But political observer Reuben Wong of the National University of Singapore saw the campaign's biggest gaffe as the 'poor handling of allegations' about his sons' national service deferment.

'Two rounds of statements claiming baseless attacks could have been replaced by one short statement of facts about dates, units and years served,' he said.

The tricks

DR Tony Tan also had some shrewd political moves up his sleeve. For someone who last fought an election in 1988, he showed an awareness of the influences in a new century.

Dr Wong said Dr Tan's engagement of the 'social media crowd' was politically astute. He invited bloggers such as Mr Brown, The Online Citizen (TOC) team and Mr Alex Au not just to cover the press conference when he announced his candidacy, but also to Sunday lunch.

In fact, TOC's interim chief, Mr Ravi Philemon, wrote on Tuesday that engagement with online media may have given Dr Tony Tan and Mr Tan Jee Say an edge.

'(Dr Tan) kept engaging TOC, despite the critical pieces our writers were writing about his campaign,' he wrote. 'He had absolutely no reason to do so.'

For Singapore Management University assistant professor Eugene Tan, it was Dr Tan Cheng Bock's indoor rally - held on the last night of the campaign - which most impressed him as a political masterstroke.

Flanked on one side by Dr Tony Tan, clearly the Government's preferred candidate, and on the other by Mr Tan Jee Say, who filled the role of opposition candidate, he quickly grasped 'the overarching themes of unity and unifying Singaporeans after a bruising May GE', said Mr Eugene Tan.

Dr Tan Cheng Bock's vigorous campaign and message got him within a whisker of victory. He lost to Dr Tony Tan by 0.35 per cent of the vote, or just over 7,382 ballots.

But Dr Tony Tan, who started off with an inbuilt advantage as the only 'household name' of the four, maintained a sliver-thin lead till the end.

'He presented himself at all times as the unflappable, conservative, safe candidate for the role,' noted Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh. He also brought out his 'softer side' through dialogues with social entrepreneurs and visits to old folks' homes, among other things, she added.

Through the gruelling days in the run-up to Polling Day, the one thing all four candidates could count on was an outpouring of encouragement and support from those whose paths they crossed.

Even Mr Tan Kin Lian, who polled a dismal 5 per cent in the end, met a steady stream of well-wishers on his walkabouts.

All four men had contributed to reenergising the Elected Presidency, and in coming forward to contest, were making political history.

It was not lost on voters.

On the final day at the hustings, Mr Tan Jee Say and his team embarked on a six-stop MRT tour of the north. Mr Tan's exhaustion showed as he tried to catch some shut-eye at one point while standing on the train.

At one stop in Choa Chu Kang, there was a commotion at the entrance to the station as well-wishers lined up for pictures with the group. A security guard, wearing a vest with the words 'Transit Security', made his way over to them.

Some members of Mr Tan's team looked worried at his approach, anticipating that they would be told to leave the station.

Actually, all he wanted was a mini-flag with Mr Tan's image.