

## **Presidential election on Aug 27**

### **Screening panel has up to Aug 16 to decide who is eligible to contest**

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***The Straits Times***, 4 August 2011

Singaporeans will elect their next president on Aug 27, in what is shaping up to be the most intensely contested race since the elected presidency became a hallmark of Singapore's political system almost 20 years ago.

The Saturday will be declared a public holiday for people to vote in Singapore's third elected president.

Nomination Day will be on Aug 17, giving a minimum nine days for campaigning to woo an estimated 2.35 million eligible voters - plus a Cooling-Off Day when no campaigning and fresh advertising will be allowed.

The much-awaited writ of election, issued by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday, also said the nomination of candidates will take place at the People's Association (PA) in Jalan Besar.

And the Returning Officer is PA chief executive director Yam Ah Mee.

So far, five men are eyeing Singapore's highest public office but whether they are eligible to contest will be decided by the Presidential Elections Committee (PEC).

The three-member committee will announce its decision by Aug 16, the eve of Nomination Day.

Mr Eddie Teo, the Public Service Commission chairman, will head the PEC and its other members are Ms Chan Lai Fung, Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority chairman, and Mr Sat Pal Khattar, a member of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights.

They will evaluate, among other things, the contender's integrity and his financial experience like in steering a company with a paid-up capital of at least \$100 million.

Four of the five contenders have applied for the certificate of eligibility.

They are former deputy prime minister Tony Tan, 71; former MP Tan Cheng Bock, 71; former NTUC Income chief Tan Kin Lian, 63; and former senior civil servant Tan Jee Say, 57.

Former JTC Corp group chief financial officer Andrew Kuan, 57, declared ineligible in 2005, has said he plans to hand in his application tomorrow. The deadline is 1pm on Saturday.

Two-term President S R Nathan, 87, is not seeking re-election.

Yesterday, the hopefuls took the news of the writ in their stride, saying they stand ready.

Said Mr Tan Kin Lian: 'My supporters are ready to go out actively to participate in the campaign.'

Added Dr Tony Tan: 'I look forward to a vigorous exchange of views during the campaign, carried out with decorum and in a manner befitting the office at stake.'

By a quirk of the calendar, the nomination and polling dates and days are the same as those in the last presidential race six years ago.

But beyond that, they are marked by major differences.

Mr Nathan was elected twice without a contest. Mr Kuan sought to enter the race in 2005, but was deemed ineligible.

In contrast, the upcoming election could see at least a three-cornered fight.

Dr Tony Tan - as a former deputy prime minister (DPM) and chairman of media company Singapore Press Holdings - makes the cut. Dr Tan Cheng Bock - a non-executive chairman of Chuan Hup investment holding company - likely would as well.

Mr Tan Kin Lian could also qualify if the PEC accepts that NTUC Income - despite being a cooperative and not a company - is an organisation of adequate size and complexity.

But a question mark hangs over Mr Tan Jee Say and Mr Kuan.

Mr Tan was regional managing director of now-defunct AIB Govett Asia, an asset management company. It did not have \$100 million in paid-up capital then, but he argues that he qualifies because it managed several hundred million dollars in investment funds.

Mr Kuan, to bolster his second bid, has said he will submit new documents such as a performance appraisal.

With this state of play, the level of competition looks set to be stiffer than in 1993, during Singapore's first - and only - contested presidential election. Then, former DPM Ong Teng Cheong defeated his sole rival, retired accountant-general Chua Kim Yeow.

Also notable this time is the way in which aspiring candidates have put themselves forward.

Past elections were sedate affairs, with government-endorsed candidates entering the fray.

Even the 1993 contest was engineered by the People's Action Party: Mr Chua was a reluctant candidate, having been persuaded by retired DPM Goh Keng Swee and then Finance Minister Richard Hu that it would be detrimental to the budding institution if the first presidential race saw no contest.

This time round, no such cajoling was needed. In fact, there might not be a government-endorsed candidate at all.

In the wake of a 'watershed' General Election that heightened political awareness, Dr Tan Cheng Bock, a former veteran PAP MP, surprised many - including those in his former party - by stepping out as an independent candidate.

Dr Tony Tan - his long-time links with the establishment notwithstanding - has also stressed that he was putting himself forward without the backing of any political party.

In the past 10 weeks, a vigorous debate over the role and responsibilities of the elected presidency has also ensued.

Almost two decades on, the institution might be said to be coming of age.

Said former Nominated MP Chandra Mohan: 'The democratic process has matured, compared to all those years that no one really stood (for election). It is a different ball game today.'

And how the election plays out would further crystalise Singaporeans' understanding and support for the institution.

As Institute of Policy Studies academic Gillian Koh said: 'We are moving into uncharted territory.'