

Tony Tan: President can have influence **Hopefuls should 'run for office that exists, not the one they wish to have'**

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Presidential hopeful Tony Tan has weighed in on the debate on the elected president's right to speak out publicly on matters of government policy, saying that candidates should run for the presidency as it exists, 'not for the one they wish to have'.

He gave his views in a short, carefully crafted blog entry posted yesterday on his campaign website, in which he started by saying that many people had pressed him for his thoughts on the matter.

The former deputy prime minister said that while the president is not and should not be a separate power centre, he 'can have influence'.

He added that the president 'can - and should - address the concerns of Singaporeans and take them into account when exercising his or her powers'.

'These concerns can also be raised formally or informally through appropriate channels. The choice of channels to pursue depends on the individual situation,' he said.

He also said the president must have a heart for Singaporeans, and know how to reflect their concerns effectively 'in the context of national and international affairs'.

Indirectly referring to recent public discussion about the scope of the president's right to get involved in policy issues, he said: 'One can, of course, imagine very different roles for the president that would require a constitutional amendment. But the presidential election itself is the wrong forum for this.'

He ended his note by saying: 'Candidates should run for the office that exists, not for the one they wish to have.'

Dr Tan is the last of the six presidential contenders to comment on the issue. Mr Tan Kin Lian and Dr Tan Cheng Bock have both argued either directly or indirectly that the president has the right to speak out publicly on issues of concern to Singaporeans.

At an Institute of Policy Studies forum last Friday, Law Minister K. Shanmugam spelt out the constitutional limits on the president's speaking rights, pointing out that outside of the designated areas, the president can speak and act only on the advice of the Cabinet.

Another presidential hopeful, Dr Tan Cheng Bock, on Monday posted a Facebook note taking issue with a comment made by Mr Shanmugam at a Chong Pang community event, which he argued set the stage for confrontation between the office of the president and that of the prime minister.

Mr Shanmugam had said that while the president could advise the Cabinet on areas of governance outside his constitutional scope, the quality of advice would depend on the quality of the person giving it.

He also said a president who is wise, knowledgeable and experienced would generally be able to give more influential advice than a person who is less experienced or wise.

'The Minister of Law has set the stage of confrontation between the president and the PM when he speaks of the different level of respect the PM will give depending on who the elected president is,' said Dr Tan Cheng Bock in his Facebook note.

He said the president would have received the endorsement of Singaporeans who voted for him, and asked if Mr Shanmugam was questioning their decision.

Mr Shanmugam's comments were 'a very judgmental approach' and amounted to saying 'I will hear you if I respect you and if I like you', he said.

'There must be mutual respect for the government of the day and the presidency, as both are elected by Singaporeans,' he added.

At the same time, he also reiterated that the president must not be another power centre and must work within the boundaries laid out in the Constitution.

The president must work with the Government in a 'proper and correct manner in the interest of Singapore', especially given the current world economic climate, he added.

Responding to Dr Tan Cheng Bock's post, Mr Shanmugam said: 'Nothing I had said justifies Dr Tan Cheng Bock's suggestions. I had explained in detail the constitutional position of a head of state. I have also made clear that the presidency must be respected. I do not want to comment further.'

What Dr Tan said

I ATTENDED the Institute of Policy Studies forum on the elected presidency last Friday. Both the presentations by Law Minister K. Shanmugam, Professors Tommy Koh and Thio Li-ann, as well as the questions from the floor, provided much food for thought.

The ongoing debate has certainly set many thinking seriously about the role of the highest office in our nation.

Many have pressed me for my thoughts on this issue. My understanding of the role remains: The president is not – and should not be – a separate power centre. But the president can have influence.

The president can – and should – address the concerns of Singaporeans and take them into account when exercising his or her powers. These concerns can also be raised formally or informally through appropriate channels. The choice of channels to pursue depends on the individual situation.

The president must have a heart for all Singaporeans. The president must also know how to reflect these concerns effectively in the context of national and international affairs.

One can, of course, imagine very different roles for the president that would require a constitutional amendment. But the presidential election itself is the wrong forum for this.

Candidates should run for the office that exists, not for the one they wish to have.