

## Complex dynamics at play ahead of presidential poll

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Following a hotly-contested Presidential Election (PE) in 2011 and recent changes made to the scheme to elect Singapore's Head of State, the polls to be held later this year to choose a successor to President Tony Tan will be closely watched.

Add to that the fact that Singapore will hold its first reserved election for a minority race, under the spectre of an uncertain economy — which could bring candidates' financial acumen into sharper focus — and the coming PE could rank as one of the most significant so far.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan said: "If the global economy takes a beating in the lead-up to PE 2017, then the spotlight would shift to a focus on which candidate has the requisite expertise and experience, would better inspire confidence on being able to work closely with the People's Action Party (PAP) Government to help Singapore overcome the economic challenges, including drawing down on our past reserves if the situation warrants it."

Away from the economy, the election "may well serve as a barometer for the public's acceptance of the Government's socio-moral direction — the protection of minority interests in the political sphere", said Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie from Nanyang Technological University's School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

### **FACTORS AT PLAY**

The election will also take place amid what analysts and national leaders, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, have observed as a growing mood in developed countries, where voters are fed up with mainstream political parties and are voting for change.

Given that the President of Singapore does not exercise executive powers, any potential impact on the election could be muted — even if prospective candidates seek to capitalise on such sentiments, analysts said.

The outcomes of the past two General Elections (GE) have also shown that the mood is not widespread among voters in Singapore, even though there is a "very vocal minority", said Asst Prof Woo. "While there may be some spill-over (effect) ... my sense is that its impact on local politics will be limited," he said.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser pointed out that voters' dissatisfaction had manifested itself in the GE 2011 result, which saw the PAP win 60.1 per cent of the vote — its lowest since independence.

Four years later — after addressing Singaporeans' concerns over issues such as the inflow of foreigners, housing and public transport — the PAP recovered from the setback to romp to victory with almost 70 per cent of the vote.

"Given that the Elected President cannot be a centre of power, I doubt it can act as a 'lightning rod' of sorts that can attract the disaffected hoping to vote a strong figure to 'shake up' the government to do their bidding," Dr Tan said.

Other analysts, however, noted that the fact that the President is confined to custodial and ceremonial functions did not stop candidates in PE 2011 from going down that path.

Institute of Policy Studies deputy director for research Gillian Koh noted that it remains to be seen if this time around, candidates “play the card of being ‘anti-elitist’ and turn the campaign into an auction on how liberal they will be in using the nation’s savings and even how little they will take home of the presidential salary”. She said: “We saw that in PE 2011 but the question is whether candidates will go any further and whether Singaporeans will buy that line of campaigning.”

While the analysts stressed that the dynamics during a GE are quite different from a PE, they were divided on whether the PE could become a proxy referendum on the Government’s performance, and have a bearing on any candidates endorsed by the Government. While Asst Prof Woo felt this was “unavoidable”, Dr Koh said she was certain that the Government will guard against that by “clearing the decks of any policy controversies”.

She said: “Instead, it would want the vote to be more a decision about who will have the wisdom, integrity and courage to screen through the proposed Bills to use the country’s past reserves.”

## **WHAT IT COULD BOIL DOWN TO**

Given the “ethnic underpinnings”, analysts said, the coming PE will have a very different complexion from previous polls. SIM Global Education political commentator Felix Tan believes that voters’ familiarity with a minority candidate will be a significant advantage. “It depends on who these candidates will be, but Singaporeans are a pragmatic lot. Most will not vote for someone whose credentials and achievements can be easily put in doubt. The lesser-known candidates will not stand much of a chance.”

The non-Malay communities, in particular, will need to scrutinise the candidates and what they represent, he noted.

“This is important as the Presidential candidate will need to represent the interests of not only one particular segment of the (population), but the interest of all Singaporeans, regardless of race,” he said.

Assoc Prof Eugene Tan expects a “low key” election — a stark contrast to the PE 2011 — that “may well turn on which candidate best epitomises Singapore’s multi-culturalism and who is able to appeal to Singaporeans across the board”.

“In keeping with the nuances of Malay culture and ethos, candidates (will likely) involve in a more subtle engagement with voters in which they will delicately put forth their case as to their suitability and electability,” he said.

Changes to the Elected Presidency were passed into law last November, about 10 months after Prime Minister Lee announced that the scheme would be reviewed. Apart from putting in place a mechanism to ensure Singapore has a minority President from time to time, the criteria for aspirants to the highest office were also tightened, among other amendments. Those from the private sector seeking to contest would have to have helmed a company with at least S\$500 million in shareholders’ equity, up from S\$100 million in paid-up capital.

For Dr Koh, a candidate's financial and management nous could come to the fore if economic conditions deteriorate. "To some extent, voters will need to feel that the candidates have the wherewithal to understand state finances and a quintessential Singaporean to do the best job in the role. The more uncertain the economic climate and the greater the likelihood that a Bill to spend the reserves might arise, the more important the qualities of financial acumen will be."

## **AUGust POLL 'MOST LIKELY'**

The PE is due by late August, when Dr Tony Tan's term ends. The Constitution states that a PE can be conducted "not more than three months before the date of expiration of the term of office of the incumbent", or within six months after the office is vacated before the end of a term.

Previous PEs were typically conducted towards the end of each six-year term. Most of the analysts expect the same, but a few felt that the election could be held earlier, possibly as soon as May — not long after the presentation of the Budget, which creates a "feel-good atmosphere", as S Rajaratnam School of International Studies Associate Professor Alan Chong puts it.

The PE will see Singaporeans elect the country's first Malay President in almost five decades. Singapore's first and only Malay President, Yusof Ishak, died in office in 1970.

So far, several names have been bandied about as potential candidates: Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob, former Cabinet minister Abdullah Tarmugi, Communications and Information Minister Yaacob Ibrahim, Environment and Water Resources Minister Masagos Zulkifli, Bank of Singapore chief executive officer Bahren Shaari, and former Deloitte & Touche managing partner Po'ad Mattar, who is also a member of the Council of Presidential Advisers.

While some observers have expressed concern over a small pool of eligible hopefuls, analysts said they do not expect a walkover, although they acknowledged the possibility.

In Singapore's first PE in 1993, former accountant-general Chua Kim Yeow openly acknowledged his reluctance to stand against Mr Ong Teng Cheong, who eventually won the election. The next two elections were walkovers, with Mr S R Nathan taking office.

The previous PE in 2011 — with four candidates — was the most keenly contested. "That's the nature of (politics) in Singapore today ... We (have entered) into the era of a politically divided society and I think people will take any opportunity, if they are eligible, to contest," said Dr Chong.