

Four eligible to contest ...

Tan Jee Say, Tan Kin Lian among quartet who receive Certificates of Eligibility

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The stage has been set for the most keenly-fought contest yet for the highest office of the land. Yesterday, the Presidential Elections Committee (PEC) announced that four out of six applicants have been issued Certificates of Eligibility.

And barring any hiccups on Nomination Day in filing their respective paperwork and deposits, the Republic's seventh President — and the third to be elected — will be one of these four: Former Ayer Rajah Member of Parliament Tan Cheng Bock, former civil servant Tan Jee Say, former Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan Keng Yam or ex-NTUC Income chief Tan Kin Lian.

The unsuccessful applicants were former private tutor Ooi Boon Ewe and former JTC Corporation group chief financial officer Andrew Kuan.

In a statement, the PEC said it deliberated on “the merits of each application, taking into account the information provided by the applicant and obtained from various Government agencies”.

Under the Constitution, eligible candidates must have served for not less than three years as Minister, Chief Justice, Speaker, Attorney-General, chairman of the Public Service Commission, Auditor-General, Accountant-General or Permanent Secretary; as chairman or chief executive officer of a statutory board; or as chairman of the board of directors or chief executive officer of a Singapore company with a paid-up capital of at least S\$100 million.

Having qualified under this criterion, Dr Tony Tan, 71, and Dr Tan Cheng Bock, also 71 and a non-executive chairman of Chuan Hup Holdings, had to satisfy the PEC that they are “of integrity, good character and reputation”.

The committee found that both men fit the bill.

Mr Tan Kin Lian, 63, and Mr Tan Jee Say, 57, applied for certification under an alternative clause which requires the aspirant to have held office for at least three years in a post that the committee deems would have given him the requisite experience and ability in administering and managing financial affairs to carry out the Elected President's duty of safeguarding Singapore's reserves.

Explaining why Mr Tan Kin Lian, who was the chief executive officer of NTUC Income for almost 30 years, was deemed eligible, the PEC said it found the co-operative was comparable in size and complexity to a company with a paid-up capital of S\$100 million.

As for Mr Tan Jee Say — who stood under the Singapore Democratic Party banner at the May General Election before resigning from the party last month to contest for the presidency — the PEC said: “As the regional managing director of AIB Govett (Asia) Limited, Mr Tan had overall responsibility for the company's operations. The committee is therefore of the view that Mr Tan held a position of comparable seniority and responsibility as a CEO.”

The asset management firm was deemed to be an organisation “of equivalent complexity when compared to companies in Singapore with a paid-up capital of S\$100 million”.

The PEC also deemed Mr Tan Kin Lian and Mr Tan Jee Say to be of “integrity, good character and reputation”.

In the case of Mr Ooi, who had asked for a waiver from the criteria, the PEC said it has no power to waive any of the constitutional requirements.

The Committee also rejected Mr Kuan, in his second bid to enter the presidential race, reiterating that his post in JTC Corporation was not of sufficient seniority and responsibility required of aspirants.

All that remains for Singapore to see a four-cornered fight is for the hopefuls to present the necessary documents — including the Political Donation Certificate — to the Returning Officer, as well as pay the S\$48,000 election deposit to the Accountant-General, come Nomination Day next Wednesday.

Thereafter, the four candidates will have nine days to campaign by way of television broadcasts, rallies, banners and posters. They can also campaign on the the Internet and new media, according to guideleelines issued last month by the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO).

Each candidate will be given two 10-minute blocks of air time to address the electorate, while MediaCorp will produce and broadcast a television profile on each of them, as well as hold a joint television interview with all the candidates.

Analysts Surprised

Dr Tony Tan, who held a closed-door dialogue at the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce & Industry yesterday, said he expects a “vigorous exchange of views during the campaign, with all Singaporeans participating in the discussion”.

“At the same time, I hope that the campaign will be carried out with decorum and in a manner befitting the Office of President,” he added.

Mr Tan Kin Lian echoed his sentiments, saying: “At this juncture, I wish to assure the Public and all concerned that my campaign will be run in a clean and dignified manner, as befitting the status of the office.”

Mr Tan Jee Say — who was also out and about yesterday, giving a lunchtime talk in the CBD — said that he too was looking forward to a “dignified contest”.

Speaking to Channel NewsAsia, he conceded that Dr Tony Tan “has much more exposure than the rest of us... We cannot deny nor deprive him of that advantage over us but I think we have a more credible story than him. I have a more credible story than him”.

He added: “My story is that I’m a non-PAP candidate and I’m the only truly independent. I have never been a member of the PAP, whereas the other 3 candidates have been.”

The fact that Singaporeans will be voting for a President for the first time since the inaugural Presidential Election in 1993 was not lost on Dr Tan Cheng Bock. He told Today: “This contest is good for Singapore because for the first time in 18 years, Singaporeans will get the chance to vote for the Elected Presidency.”

Political analysts interviewed by Today were surprised by the number of prospective candidates who made the cut.

In particular, former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong said he was “pleasantly surprised” that Mr Tan Jee Say got the nod. Said

Mr Siew: “Some cynics may call this a strategy of splitting the votes, but it comes back to the integrity of the PEC. If they are doing the job in the right way, this is the decision they should have made.”

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan added: “Whatever misapprehensions people had of the PEC can be laid to rest. They have reviewed the applications objectively to see if the candidates meet the requirements.”

However, Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh felt the PEC could have done better, by elaborating on its decision.

Said Dr Koh: “Members of the public, even among the more informed, don’t know very much about, for example, Tan Jee Say’s company AIB Govett (Asia). We need to rely on what the PEC knows, and hopefully it is sufficient for the public. It is very much a process of the PEC building up the trust.”

Additional reporting by Esther Ng and Tan Weizhen