

President Nathan calls it a day, after 12 years

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As President S R Nathan yesterday ruled himself out of the coming Presidential Election, he reiterated that he has "tried to do (his) best" in all his duties even as he conceded he has earned his "fair share of criticism".

Summing up his 12 year tenure - as well as looking at the road ahead for the office of the Head of State - in seven paragraphs, Mr Nathan said in a press release yesterday that with his 87th birthday coming in a few days, ultimately, age is the reason why he believes he will be unsuited for the "heavy responsibilities and physical demands" of a third term.

"Anyone who takes on public responsibilities has to expect (criticism). I have taken such comments - whether made directly or via social media - as made in good conscience, and well intended," he said.

"If I have fallen short, I would like the people of Singapore to know that this has not been for lack of effort or commitment."

And as he talked about how he sought public support for various social causes, and the "goodwill and affection of countless Singaporeans" he received, Mr Nathan also had a message for the public.

No matter how people perceive the role of the Elected President, the country's welfare ultimately depends on the quality of people in Parliament and Government, who will be managing Singapore, he said.

"Whether in the office of President or in the executive arm of Government, we'll always need people of strong character and vision who resist populist pressures and the temptation to sacrifice the long-term interest of the nation in response to those who merely snipe without having to take responsibility," added Mr Nathan, who acknowledged his "eternal debt" for the opportunity to serve as President.

His words yesterday brought to mind, among Members of Parliament and political analysts, his contributions to the nation and the different approach he brought to the Istana compared to his predecessor.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said the way Mr Nathan addressed the criticism levelled against him was reminiscent of the way he had defended the use of the reserves for the 2009 Resilience Budget - with equanimity.

And as far as the debate on the Elected President's role and powers has always gone, the national reserves have always been a key issue, analysts noted.

"(Mr Nathan) didn't seek to expand the role of the Presidency to safeguard the national reserves like his predecessor Ong Teng Cheong," East Asian Institute senior research fellow Lam Peng Er told MediaCorp.

"Mr Nathan has made it clear that he has to act within the Constitution. It happens that (Mr Ong) had a different reading of the Constitution about the President's custodial role."

And with that, Mr Nathan's term will "be best remembered as a smooth and harmonious if not passive Presidency which avoided any clashes with the Cabinet", Dr Lam added.

This would be in line with the Government's White Paper on safeguarding the reserves, which listed non-binding guidelines for a harmonious working relationship between the Elected President and the Cabinet, noted constitutional expert Thio Li-ann.

But with Mr Nathan not seeking re-election, she said it remained to be seen what style the next President will adopt, "within the confines of the constitutional mandate", as the guidelines are not binding.

MPs paid tribute to Mr Nathan's contributions, which they remembered for more than just his Presidential duties.

Veteran MP Charles Chong described him as an outstanding diplomat in his position as an Ambassador to the United States, citing the Michael Fay incident in which he had to defend Singapore's position soundly.

Mr Chong was also impressed with Mr Nathan's bravery, as he had volunteered to exchange himself for hostages in the 1974 hijacking of the Laju boat.

MPs Halimah Yacob and Teo Ho Pin recalled his contributions in the labour movement - which he was with for a brief period in the 1970s - and his fund-raising work for many charities. Mr Nathan started the President's Challenge, for instance.

"He has the ability to connect with ordinary Singaporeans, from the highest to the lowest. That's one mark of a good President," said Madam Halimah.

In a press statement, presidential hopeful Tony Tan said Mr Nathan "has served all Singaporeans well". Said the former Deputy Prime Minister: "His time in office will be remembered as one of wisdom and compassion. I join Singaporeans in thanking President Nathan for his steadfast commitment to duty."