

Do you know what your president can do? Survey shows S'poreans still unclear about role of head of state

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Despite the heated debates about the role of the Elected President during the Presidential Election just a few months ago, many Singaporeans appear to be still unclear about what the man in the highest office of the land can do.

Over the last two months, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) asked over 2,000 people to pick from 11 statements describing the roles of the President.

Of these 11 statements, only five were aligned with the Government's interpretation of the office.

Results, which were released yesterday, showed most people recognised the President's role in representing Singapore's foreign relations.

However, many also believed that he could ensure the Government manages the economy wisely, and was free to speak publicly on national issues he thinks are important – roles that are beyond the official boundaries of what the President is supposed to do.

It's not just the voters who were unclear. Even the candidates themselves seemed confused during the campaign.

"The competing and sometimes conflicting visions on the Presidency led to candidates over-promising during the campaign," Singapore Management University's assistant law professor Eugene Tan said during the panel discussion.

He later told *The New Paper*: "It's worrying because many times, Singaporeans will trust the candidates based on what they say and the latter have a social responsibility to properly describe the roles of the EP (Elected President)."

Too much power?

Meanwhile, Dr Kevin Tan, adjunct professor of law at the National University of Singapore and adjunct professor at Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, questioned if the Presidential Elections Committee (PEC) was given too much power to decide on candidates' eligibility.

He also mooted the idea of having an Upper House, like the House of Lords.

In Britain, members in the House of Lords "double-check" new laws that are proposed to make sure the latter are fair and will work.

Those in the Upper House would also have the power to vote against unpopular proposals.

During a question-and-answer segment, political observer Derek da Cunha questioned the wisdom of alternative voting systems to replace the current first-past-the-post model. Some analysts had been unhappy with the present system.

Right now, the first candidate who gains a simple majority of votes becomes the President.

In a run-off system, two rounds of voting can be called. During the first round, if a candidate receives a majority of the vote (50 per cent + one vote), that candidate is elected as President.

If no one receives a majority, the field is cut down to the top two candidates who received the highest number of votes. A runoff election is held – and the winner is the one who gets the most votes.

Mr da Cunha said: "I have doubts about the wisdom of the run-off system being the most sophisticated alternative to our first-past-the-post model.

"What the voters did this time were casting a positive vote – they were voting out of conviction."

If a weak candidate was eliminated in the run-off system, he and his supporters might end up playing the role of kingmaker: "They would wield a disproportionate say over who becomes President, maybe even voting negatively to keep a candidate they dislike out of the picture."

While the experts were at odds over which system is better for voting in Singapore's President, they agreed more had to be done to inform people about his roles.

"More political education is needed on the role of the elected President because we cannot have a debate if it's not an informed debate," said IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh.

Part of the research team for the survey, she added: "The starting point of the informed debate is to at least understand what the official interpretation is to begin with, and take it from there."

Dr Kevin Tan felt the popular media could help. Having Channel 8 serials outlining fictional scenarios the President faces would raise public knowledge, he said.

Traditional media

The poll showed traditional media like newspapers and television were important sources of information, providing material that shaped voter preferences.

The Internet was more influential among younger voters from higher occupation classes.

While people may not know what the elected President can do, it's clear that interest in the office has risen.

When the next election takes place around 2017, Prof Eugene Tan expects more rhetoric and the possibility of the ruling party losing more seats, so "the Elected President is likely to come to the fore as a unifying force".

What Poll Found

94% said the President can represent Singapore in meeting and visiting foreign leaders.

79% said he can block the Government's intention to spend national reserves if he disagrees with the plan.

62% said he can block the appointment of people to important positions in the public service if he disagrees with the Government's choice.

80% thought the President can ensure the Government manages the economy wisely.

75% felt he is free to speak publicly on national issues he thinks are important.