

To the end he remains dignified

Dr Tan Cheng Bock stays true to campaign message of unity

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If it had only been a two-way fight - Dr Tan Cheng Bock would have won, said his supporters.

It was a neck-and-neck race between him and former deputy prime minister Tony Tan all the way until about 4.30 this morning.

After a recount that started after 1am today, Dr Tan garnered 737,128, or 34.85 per cent of the valid votes.

He lost by 0.34 per cent, or 7,269 votes to Dr Tony Tan's 744, 397.

This result might not have been so, had the other two candidates withdrawn from the race.

Dr Tan's principal election agent, Mr G. K. Singam, 73, told The New Paper on Sunday: "The entrance of Tan Jee Say and Tan Kin Lian as candidates definitely diluted Dr Tan's vote.

"If it had just been a two-way fight, Dr Tony Tan would have definitely lost."

Another member of Dr Tan's campaign team, who declined to be named, said: "If Mr Tan Jee Say did not contest, then Dr Tan would have surely won."

Singapore Management University (SMU) assistant law professor Eugene Tan said there were several reasons why Dr Tan Cheng Bock lost to Dr Tony Tan.

One was that "he was seen as being aligned with the PAP, notwithstanding his efforts at distancing himself".

The second was that Dr Tony Tan was better known, and the tacit endorsement for him from the Government gave him an advantage.

Said Mr Tan: "They were both drawing votes from the same voting bloc, with Dr Tony Tan perceived as having stronger credentials, particularly in economic and financial matters." Despite this, Mr Tan had praise for his campaign.

He described it as a "steady and confident campaign" that "grew from strength to strength, and slowly but surely captured the imagination of Singaporeans".

Mr Tan also felt that if campaigning had gone on for "another few days, the likelihood of Dr Tan Cheng Bock's victory may well be greater".

Pointing out some of the campaign's highlights, he said Dr Tan's messages on unity and the need to unify Singapore and Singaporeans were a reflection of the "seasoned politician" in him.

Dr Tan had stressed during his campaign that he saw the role of president as a "unifying figure" to bring people together.

Mr Tan also noted Dr Tan's ability to reach out and engage Singaporeans from all walks of life.

"The ability to bridge divides made his candidacy even more valuable," he said.

Senior research fellow Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies said on air yesterday that Dr Tan's message of multiculturalism was a "powerful one" and "central to the Singapore identity".

She also felt that Dr Tan had a broad base and tugged at voters' heartstrings.

Mr Tan added that it was at Dr Tan's "unifying rally" that this ability was demonstrated - 13 ordinary Singaporeans spoke about how he impacted their lives.

If he had to pick a "high" in Dr Tan's campaign, Mr Tan said the rally was it.

Unifying Singapore

"It was not about criticising government policies, or stoking anger, angst and frustration. It was about people coming together to work towards the good of Singapore. There (at the rally) the thrust of his campaign as unifying Singapore became tangible; real," he said. And out of the four rallies, his stood out as it was the only one to use sign language to communicate with the hearing-impaired.

Yesterday, as he visited about 10 polling centres around the island through the day, he was greeted warmly and even saluted at some of the polling stations.

Staying consistent with the image he portrayed throughout his campaign, his gentlemanly manner was evident yesterday.

When Mr Kelvin Chng, a photographer with The New Paper on Sunday, slipped and fell yesterday, Dr Tan rushed to help him up.

He also asked Mr Chng several times after that if he was fine.

In the afternoon, Dr Tan met fellow candidate Dr Tony Tan.

When the latter asked if they could shake hands, Dr Tan replied: "Sure."

Dignified to the end, Dr Tan showed that the campaign was beyond himself.

His campaign symbol, a palm tree, directed people to think about Singapore's multiracial society rather than just him.

He had said that even if he lost, he would "walk out of the Presidential Election honourably and feel proud" about doing a good job.

Addressing his supporters at Jurong East Stadium this morning, he said: "So we've lost. But we've also won...I won't close my door.

"I won't stop here. I'll continue to engage Singaporeans. In our own special way, we must always be a family. Go home, thank you so much for coming."