

K Shanmugam defends Tharman's bid for presidential candidacy amid concerns over political pluralism

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In response to questions raised about diversity in Singapore politics, Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam has made remarks about Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam's potential candidature in the upcoming presidential election.

Both Mr Shanmugam and Mr Tharman have been colleagues and fellow members of the People's Action Party (PAP) for many years.

During the discussion at the Institute of Policy Studies' 35th anniversary conference on Monday, Shanmugam robustly defended the autonomy of Tharman's decision-making process.

"If Mr. Tharman... does anybody think that he is anyone's patsy or if someone asks him to stand in his stance, he is his own man," said Mr Shanmugam.

"He decides. He makes up his mind. And if you look at it like that, he's a strong candidate. Does that become the PAP's fault that he's a strong candidate? I think some things are probably properly laid at our door and some things I think we shouldn't be responsible for. Good candidate comes forward. Well, that's pluralism. And, you know, Singapore has other good candidates."

Since the first presidential election in 1993, all presidents, whether elected through contest or walkover, have been connected to the PAP and supported by its machinery during their campaigns. Non-PAP affiliated candidates who sought to contest were disqualified due to being unable to meet the stringent criteria set for private sector candidates.

Addressing the insinuation that Mr Tharman's candidacy, backed by the government, could signify the People's Action Party's (PAP) desire for reduced political pluralism, Mr Shanmugam counterargued that the level of political diversity is ultimately determined by the citizens of the country.

"I am yet to come across outside of Scandinavia any country that has successfully made political pluralism work for its citizens, particularly when you factor in the fact that we are extremely small and have more variety of natural insecurities, leave us, like whether it's me or somebody else or in PAP or whatever, this is Singapore, This is what you have."

Mr Tharman announced last Thursday his intention to run in the upcoming presidential election and his subsequent stepping down from PAP and his various appointments.

Advocating for a healthy contest in the presidential race, Mr Tharman has downplayed in his comments to the local media about concerns of potential conflicts of interest due to his extensive roles within the government.

Mr Tharman's candidacy announcement has sparked scrutiny from critics, including Kenneth Jeyaretnam, Secretary General of the Reform Party. Jeyaretnam voiced concerns over the potential conflict of interest, given Mr Tharman's extensive roles in the Government,

particularly as Finance Minister, Chairman of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, and Deputy Chairman of Singapore's sovereign wealth fund GIC.

"Ownself Check Ownself" wrote Mr Jeyaretnam in a recent blog post, criticizing the prospect of Tharman auditing the management of the state's reserves, a responsibility he previously held as a key figure in the Government.