

S'poreans lack understanding of President's roles: study

Faris Mokhtar

Yahoo News, 1 November 2011



The 27 August presidential election saw Dr Tony Tan (above, centre) beat former MP Dr Tan Cheng Bock by a narrow 0.34 per cent margin. (Photo: Istana)

Singaporeans have limited understanding on the official roles of the elected president, a recent study suggests.

In a post-election survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), the 2,025 respondents polled were asked to identify, out of 11 statements, the roles of the president.

Only 42 per cent managed to identify six or more of the “correct” roles, viewed as the official interpretation based on the Constitution. On the other hand, 58 per cent only identified five or less.

Respondents in the first group comprised Singaporeans in the service class, living in private housing and highly-educated. Those in the latter group are likely to be 65-years-old and above, from the working class and less-educated.

In the survey, the president’s role to represent Singapore in foreign relations was cited as most important, followed by his responsibilities as head of state.

However, when asked to choose the roles considered important in shaping voting decisions, two out of the three selected did not align with the official interpretation.

They are, “to ensure that the government manages the economy wisely” and “to ensure that the government does what it promised in the general election”.

The phone survey findings which took place over two weeks was presented at an IPS forum on Tuesday.

"I think first and foremost, Singaporeans have probably the duty to educate themselves," said assistant professor Eugene Tan from Singapore Management University, when asked how the public can be more informed.

He reasoned that when the government tried to outline the official roles of the presidency, many saw it as an attempt to mould the institution based on its view.

"So the government will try to educate through the schools but I think Singaporeans have the responsibility to be more informed," he said.

Another way to create awareness, Tan said, is through the president himself.

"The other one would be, the elected president himself, through what he does. I think the idea of an annual report would certainly help to educate Singaporeans on the roles and functions of the president."

The August 27 presidential election was only the second time that the post for an elected presidency was contested since the institution was created in 1991. It saw former cabinet minister Dr Tony Tan won by the slimmest of margin, 0.34 per cent, over rival and former MP Dr Tan Cheng Bock.

However, constitutional law expert Dr Kevin Tan said that Singaporeans cannot be blamed because the legislation on the elected presidency is "extremely, extremely complicated".

But one way to educate the public, he said, is by portraying a "fictitious" character of the elected president in a Channel 8 drama series.

"I think you might actually succeed. I watch these dramas because I'm always interested in the kind of messages that are sought to be portrayed," Tan said, adding that the message will reach through to not only the Chinese but general audience as well.

The IPS survey also found that candidates' independence from political parties was the least important factor in influencing one's decision to vote.

Instead, Singaporeans chose values such as honesty, fairness and ability to represent the nation as top factors they would like to see in a candidate.

This result came as a surprise to analysts since all four candidates Dr Tony Tan, Tan Kin Lian, Dr Tan Cheng Bock and Tan Jee Say all sought to distance themselves from their former parties during the campaign period.

The first three were former People's Action Party members, while Tan Jee Say was formerly a member of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP).

Another interesting note was that 56 per cent of the respondents disagreed when asked whether the president should be paid more than the prime minister. Those

who opposed this view were from the 40-54 years old bracket and higher occupational class.

Generational shift in Singapore?

The aftermath of the two elections this year, said professor Eugene Tan, also pointed to a “generational shift” within the electorate, towards voters born post-independence.

However, he noted that this shift is not just about numbers but a change in public attitudes and values. This he added, is a challenge which political parties and candidates should take into account in the next election.

“It is a tough balancing act because it means that candidates and parties now need to be a broad church. They need to attract votes from every vote bank; the young, the old, the better-educated, working-class.

“So in a way, it makes it more challenging, but it’s also good because you want political parties and candidates who can reach out to a very diverse group,” said Tan.