Singapore stumbles on election process

Lately, Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) Government has enjoyed a good run from the international press. Time magazine's July 15 cover story, "Singapore Swings," posed the question: "Can Asia's nanny state give up its authoritarian ways?" According to the subheading, tight control is giving way and the city-state is getting competitive, creative, even funky.

The Far Eastern Economic Review's July 15 cover story, "Image Overhaul," also afforded Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong a chance to reconstruct himself as a mellowing leader, a more giving way to a willingness to work with people.

But the process of replacing outgoing Elected President Ong Teng Cheong serves as a sober reminder: there are serious structural limits to the possibilities of political change in Singapore.

At nomination day on Wednesday, only one candidate had qualified, S.R. Nathan. Persuaded to stand by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, he will be sworn in on September 1. There will be no elections.

Most importantly, strict eligibility criteria for the position ensure that only pro-PAP establishment figures qualify. Candidates must have headed a ministry, statutory board or a $100 million ($2 million) company for a minimum of three years.

Don't believe the hype about emerging political freedoms in Singapore, writes Garry Rodan.

The elected presidency, introduced in 1992, was the brainchild of Lee Kuan Yew. Against a background of modest electoral gains by the opposition, he feared a fresh election producing a non-PAP government.

Under this scenario, "opportunists and adventurers," he argued, could deplete Singapore's massive foreign reserves. A transformed and spendthrift PAP government might also prove a threat.

The answer was an elected presidency involving veto powers over reserves and key public-sector appointments.

Such powers could hamstring any government by PAP opponents, whether comprising opportunists and adventurers or responsible reformists.

In the meantime, the elected president was intended to play a purely ceremonial role. Yet even in Singapore's highly orchestrated political life, occasionally things don't quite go to plan. During its six-year term, the republic's first Elected President and former Deputy Prime Minister challenged the government to clarify the definition of "past reserves". After taking office in 1993, Ong requested a full inventory of the assets comprising the reserves. The Auditor-General told him that would take 52 man-years to compile. The President claims he finally received some information two or three years later.

While Ong was preoccupied about whether to run again, at no time did the government publicly endorse another term. It now openly expresses concerns about Ong's health.

Nathan's was only one of three or four names presented to Cabinet. But instead of endorsing a number of candidates from whom the electorate could choose, Cabinet rallied behind Nathan. This raises the question: is the president elected or selected?

Like Russia's Vladimir Putin, also handpicked for political honours this month, Nathan's curriculum vitae includes having headed his country's national security agency in the 1970s.

Lei later recruited Nathan to the executive chairmanship of the Straits Times Press group in the early 1980s. Some journalists wore black armbands in protest.

The President is to be serve as Singapore's Ambassador to the US and is now the director of the newly established Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.

While public surveys indicate an overwhelming preference for an election, neither of the other two applicants for certificates of eligibility qualified. They were Democratic Progress Party leader Tan Soo Phuan and private tutor Oei Boon Ewe.

The Singapore Democratic Party has called for an election just as the same, an exercise that would at least enable protest votes against the process by the casting of blank ballots. This will not happen.

In the previous and only election thus far, the Government managed to talk reluctant retiring banker Chua Kim Yeow into contesting Ong. Without a campaign he managed to secure 91.3 per cent of the vote – about the level of general electoral support achieved at the time by opposition parties.

Election or not, the brief history of this new institution has been marked by awkwardness, if not farce. Given the nature of the eligibility criteria, even at the best of times a contest is the election you have when you are not having an election.

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