Singapore Divides Over Elite Rule

A close presidential election confirms the growing rift between the ruling party and the public.

By GARRY RODAN

Singapore’s presidential election last Saturday selected a new occupant for a largely ceremonial position. Yet the election’s conduct and outcome have wider political implications. Both highlighted tensions within the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) over the dominance of an elitist structure and ideology which is increasingly seen by many party members as an electoral liability.

The winner, Tony Tan, secured only 32.72% of the vote, prevailing by a mere 0.34%, or 7,269 of the 2.1 million votes cast by Singaporean citizens. This was despite his being the “establishment” candidate endorsed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and a host of PAP-affiliated organizations in a notionally non-party political contest.

It’s a surprising result given how utterly unsurprising presidential elections in the city-state are supposed to be. Past polls have been determined with little or no controversy. Outgoing President S.R. Nathan went uncontested in 1999 and 2005 and his predecessor, former PAP minister Ong Teng Cheong, won with a decisive margin of 16 percentage points in 1993. Highly restrictive eligibility criteria favor establishment figures.

Indeed the office in its current form, created in 1991, was supposed to offer the PAP a bulwark against the possibility that a freak result in a general election would usher in a large number of opposition members of parliament. The presidency was vested with veto power over any spending of accumulated government reserves (currently estimated at $250 billion) and the ability to make key public service appointments.

Yet in this weekend’s vote, the prime minister’s endorsement and the nod from PAP-linked trade unions—not to mention favorable treatment from government-controlled media—may have cost Mr. Tan as many votes as it gained. Mr. Tan’s establishment credentials as a former deputy prime minister and executive director of the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation, a sovereign wealth fund, actually increased the challenges of persuading voters that he would be best placed to scrutinize the PAP executive through custodial powers.

The lackluster support he garnered was not so much a statement about his personal standing (he remains well-respected) as a reaction against the PAP’s perceived arrogance and political paternalism. The image of a monolithic party-state directed by political elites picking electoral winners alienates an increasing number of voters.

The other three candidates gained significant traction with voters by trumpeting their determination to make the presidency a watchdog of sorts on the government. This might not be surprising coming from Tan Lee Say, who had contested the previous parliamentary election as an opposition candidate, and ended up in a distant third place on Saturday. But the theme was picked up by Tan Cheng Bock, a former PAP backbencher who came in second, and Tan Kin Lian, former head of an insurance cooperative and a PAP member for 30 years, who placed fourth.
Changing attitudes among the electorate are fairly obvious from this result. More surprising, however, may be the divisions emerging within the PAP itself. After all, three of the four presidential candidates were cut from basically the same PAP cloth. What explains the campaign's heat?

The PAP rose to power and consolidated its position in the 1960s and 1970s as a party whose leaders had a reasonable breadth of social backgrounds and occupational experiences. It also included leaders who espoused egalitarian goals and values. These were decades of dramatic upward social mobility for Singaporeans.

By the 1980s, though, the PAP was dominated by a narrow band of technocratic elites. The authority of party leaders derived not so much from being representative of the population as from being part of a meritocracy with the educational and professional backgrounds deemed paramount to exercising power. The upper echelons of the civil service, statutory bodies and government-linked-companies became integral to the recruitment and power sharing of this new technocratic elite.

In terms of economic growth, this formula reaped impressive results in subsequent decades as Singapore's leaders adeptly exploited opportunities presented by globalization. But increased exposure to international market pressures has brought wider wealth and income inequalities, as Singaporeans increasingly find themselves directly exposed to external forces. The political consequences of this were not immediately obvious to technocratic elites with limited grassroots political skills. Meanwhile, those elites seemed increasingly remote from the public especially as salaries rose dramatically for ministers and senior civil servants—a source of growing public discontent over the past decade.

This evolution of the PAP and divergence between party and public has fueled this year's electoral dramas. In a general election in May, the PAP suffered a 6.5 percentage-point swing against it and the opposition made a significant gain in a multi-seat constituency amid widespread charges that the government's leadership is out of touch with ordinary Singaporeans.

And now the establishment candidate has come within a hair's breadth of losing the presidency. This is largely because more rank-and-file PAP politicians are worried that the top rungs are too far out of touch. Runner-up Tan Cheng Bock traded heavily on his rapport with ordinary Singaporeans. Not having risen to the top of the PAP meritocracy was a positive, enabling him to project a sense of independence. He also tapped into public concern over the influx of foreign workers. "Whatever initiatives the government does," Dr. Tan asserted, "you must put the interest of Singaporeans first. This is true whether it's in higher education or in work or in our welfare policies."

At the media conference following the announcement of Tony Tan's narrow win, Tan Cheng Bock declared: "There's definitely a division in the PAP," revealing that many grassroots PAP members said they supported him in spite of being told by some of their leaders not to. The ruling party's leaders, he suggested, need to "have a critical look at their own way of doing things," adding that "I think they have to learn how to fight again. They have lost their fighting skill."

But can old dogs learn new tricks? And, if so, how fast? The current complexion of the ruling party's ranks reflects a political culture that cannot be dismantled overnight. What this presidential election appears to have demonstrated, though, is that many who vote for the party seized a rare opportunity to register their preference for a less elitist PAP.

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