

**Singapore to elect president in test for ruling party**  
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Singaporeans will cast ballots on Saturday in the first contested presidential election in nearly two decades.

Although non-partisan, the poll is widely seen as an unofficial referendum on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's government. Just four months ago, his People's Action Party (PAP) returned to power with its worst electoral result since independence in 1965.

About 2.27 million voters will choose between four presidential candidates, who all bear the surname Tan but are not related.

singapore general election 270406Former deputy prime minister Tony Tan, 71, is regarded as the favourite.

The other hopefuls are Tan Cheng Bock, 71, a former legislator for the PAP, Tan Kin Lian, 63, the former head of insurance cooperative NTUC, and Tan Jee Say, 57, a former civil servant and the only candidate who never joined the ruling party.

Compliant with Singapore law, no candidate to succeed outgoing president SR Nathan, 87, is a member of a political party.

Two of the so-called "four Tans" resigned from the PAP just recently.

But the candidates' ties to the long-dominant party were likely to influence the decision of many voters, political observers said.

"The four contenders ... are clearly lined along an ideological spectrum, with the strongest PAP associate at one end, and the strongest PAP critic on the other," political commentator Catherine Lim said.

In the May general election, voters unhappy with the handling of hot issues like the influx of foreigners sent a warning to the party as the opposition gained historic victories.

The PAP won just 60 percent of the votes, down from 66 percent and 75 percent in earlier polls, but still took 81 of the 87 seats in parliament due to a government-friendly election system.

In Internet forums, some Singaporeans called on voters to send the party another warning on Saturday, saying "the signal sent to the PAP during the general election (was) not strong enough."

**'Still residual unhappiness'**

"There is still residual unhappiness among some voters over the so-called watershed election in May," said Eugene Tan, assistant law professor at Singapore Management University (SMU).

Opposition supporters might treat the presidential election as a by-election or a "general election part II" and "prefer a candidate who is not aligned with the PAP at all," he said.

For Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, the party was right not to endorse a candidate, although "voters can already assume who the PAP would support."

"If it does speak up, it will strengthen a by-election sentiment that we should all wish to avoid as best as possible," she said.

Direct presidential elections were first held in 1993.

But the post has been allocated mostly without ballots as a government committee in 1999 and 2005 found no other candidate qualified to stand in the polls, handing Nathan 12 years in office without a public vote.

Presidents have a largely ceremonial role and mainly act on the advice of the cabinet. They do, however, have veto rights in the spending of reserves and appointments to key public posts.

The four candidates revealed differing perceptions of the presidency and its relation to the government, ranging from "a purely custodial role, on the one hand, and an actively adversarial one on the other," Lim said.

If the anti-PAP voters succeed in electing a more independent president to office, they would "secure another people's victory this year," she said.

Other observers dampened such enthusiasm.

Although the May election had shown that Singaporeans were ready for more political diversity, "it by no means suggests that the average voter is going to throw caution to the wind and cast a ballot for a candidate with an opposition accent," SMU's Tan said.

"Ultimately, there is concern that the president must be able to work with the elected government," said Tan, who is not related to any of the four contenders.

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