

Four Tans in fray for Singapore presidency

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SINGAPORE (Aug 17, 2011): Singapore's most hotly contested presidential poll since the office became an elected post 18 years ago kicked off on Wednesday, with the winner slated to be President Tan regardless as all four candidates share the same surname.

Tan is the most common family name in the Southeast Asian city-state, where ethnic Chinese make up about 75% of the 3.3 million citizens and 1.8 million other residents. The 10-day election is seen as a referendum on the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), which has held power since independence in 1965.

The four candidates for the mainly ceremonial post will face an electorate concerned about rapid immigration to fill jobs in the fast-growing economy in the Aug. 27 poll, four months after the PAP returned to power with 60% of the vote, but faced an opposition that made historic gains.

Although officially the PAP has no preferred candidate for president, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has expressed support for former deputy prime minister Tony Tan, who is seen as the favourite with swing voters seen as the key.

A recent survey by the Institute of Policy Studies had just 23% of respondents calling themselves "conservative" or leaning towards the ruling party against 45% who described themselves as "swing" voters.

"It may be misleading to use the May 2011 general election vote share between the PAP and opposition parties as a guide to voter sentiment in this presidential election," said blogger Alex Au, whose Yawning Bread site is one of the most popular socio-political blogs in Singapore.

"As it turned out during the general election, most swing voters eventually decided to vote for the PAP," said Au, who predicts a victory for Tony Tan, but with less than 50% of the vote. There is no runoff if the victor has less than a majority of the total votes.

Only the first presidential election was contested for the post which now pays around US\$4 million (S\$3.329 million) a year, according to media reports as the government does not publish the figure.

Singapore's directly-elected president has historically performed mostly ceremonial duties, a role unlikely to change if Tony Tan, who was head of sovereign wealth fund GIC, is elected.

But if one of the other three Tans wins, the new president may exercise veto powers aggressively, and the government could face difficulty nominating people to senior positions, including those at GIC and state investor Temasek.

The winner will replace President S.R. Nathan who is retiring on Aug 31, after two six-year terms in office.

Among the other candidates, Tan Cheng Bock, a medical doctor and former PAP parliamentarian, appeals to both PAP supporters as well as swing voters because of his track record in speaking up against unpopular policies.

The other two are former CEO of insurance firm NTUC Income Tan Kin Lian and ex-regional managing director of investment firm AIB Govett (Asia) Tan Jee Say, who both have ties to opposition parties and will compete for the anti-establishment vote.

"My sense is that traditional PAP supporters are comfortable with both Dr Tony Tan and, to a lesser extent, Dr Tan Cheng Bock. The latter, for all his strong-willed independence, is not someone who is going to rock the boat," said law lecturer Eugene Tan from Singapore Management University. – Reuters

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