

Why Tharman's candidacy is a boost for the elected presidency

Apart from his international stature, the Senior Minister brings unique qualities to the contest.



Eugene K.B. Tan

Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam's announcement of his intention to run for president in the upcoming election could ignite Singaporeans' enthusiasm for the elected presidency.

With incumbent President Halimah Yacob not seeking re-election, Mr Tharman said in a letter to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Thursday that he decided to put himself forward as a candidate.

The decision had been taken after consultation with his family and in response to requests from Singaporeans from all walks of life, he said.

A candidate with the expertise, experience and standing of Mr Tharman will have much to offer to Singapore's intra-executive branch system of checks and balances.

Having been finance minister, he is well versed in domestic and international fiscal, monetary and economic matters.

This means he is more than equipped to give the Government advice on such matters, as well as to keep it on its toes on matters that the president exercises custodial powers over, such as key public sector appointments and use of national reserves.

DON'T RULE OUT A CONTEST

For all of Mr Tharman's formidable qualities, a contest for the presidency should not be ruled out at this stage.

Even though he is resigning from the Cabinet, given his ties to the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), Mr Tharman's candidacy might inspire hopefuls from the private sector who believe that they are equal to the task of being president and are able to gain the support of voters who prefer a non-establishment candidate.

Potential rivals might also hope to leverage the argument for having a contest this round. Out of five presidential elections since 1993, only two were contested (in 1993 and 2011). The act of casting a ballot is significant for democratic choice and for candidates to gain a fair hearing.

RESPECTFUL AND INDEPENDENT-MINDED

As a Nominated Member of Parliament between 2012 and 2014, I had the opportunity to observe close-up Mr Tharman in action in Parliament. In fielding parliamentary questions, he was scrupulously respectful of parliamentarians from across the aisle.

He always endeavoured to answer queries without seeking partisan advantage. During debates on his Budget statements, he was also very persuasive with his erudite arguments and patient explanations in the face of MPs' calls for the Government to do more, to spend more, and to tax less.

He never talked down to his parliamentary colleagues, especially the opposition.

His people's touch and connection with the ground are well known.

In addition to his Meet-the-People Sessions, his constituents know where to find

him on weekends when he is in his constituency.

Mr Tharman also has a reputation of being independent-minded, even as a senior Cabinet member.

In making the case for a broader meritocracy, "a meritocracy through life", and of our social safety net as a "trampoline", his take was aligned with the Government's fundamental premise. But in offering refreshing insights of how policies could – and have, in fact – evolved, he was able to nudge innovation to keep longstanding policies fit for purpose.

That independence of mind was noted by PM Lee in his letter to Mr Tharman on Thursday. This trait could be seen in Mr Tharman's calls for critical analysis and objective self-examination.

For example, commenting on

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Mr Tharman is one of few politicians who have transcended political and racial lines and can show the way forward as our multiracialism matures. This is his signature appeal and it would add to the presidency as the symbol of national unity. This role of the president should not be understated at a time of geopolitical uncertainty and more contested politics domestically.

his party's performance in the 2020 General Election, when the PAP lost two group representation constituencies (GRCs) and saw a significant vote shift against it, Mr Tharman wrote in a Facebook post that the results were good for the PAP: "First, it secured a solid mandate. Trust in the PAP to run the government and do what is best for Singaporeans is intact. Second, the swing in votes (though from an unrepeatable high in 2015) is leading the party to review its own game so as to win the hearts, and not just the minds, of a changing electorate."

"The results were also good for opposition politics – and not merely because they won more votes collectively. The stronger vote for the WP (Workers' Party) than others, with its more reasonable brand and eschewing of campaigning around a single political figure, reflected a discerning public and a political culture that bodes well for Singapore..."

LOSS AND GAINS

PM Lee correctly noted that Mr Tharman's imminent departure from the Cabinet and the PAP would be a "heavy loss".

There will be massive shoes to fill in his Jurong GRC, which has always been among the party's best-performing constituencies.

The PAP will lose a heavyweight popular politician with mass appeal, especially among swing voters who desire a PAP that can score points not just through the sheer logic of its effective policies, but through winning hearts as well.

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There is another potential plus point for Mr Tharman's candidacy. If there is a contest and he wins, the result would lay to rest the conventional view that an ethnic Chinese male candidate will have a firm electoral edge over a minority candidate.

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Each president brings unique qualities to the office and they have reshaped, within the established constitutional strictures, how the presidency remains relevant to Singapore's system of government and governance and to the people as well.

Mr Tharman's intent to seek election as president offers the promise of Singaporeans refining and adapting the presidency in tandem with the times and changing aspirations.

If elected, his presidency will be an overall gain for the country.

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