



President-elect Tharman Shanmugaratnam at Toa Payoh Hub last Saturday. The election was a vote for unity and common values such as respect across society that must define our social compact, says the writer. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

What Tharman's massive election win could mean for politics in Singapore

This was a presidential election where the vast majority of voters demonstrated that they do not welcome a politicised presidency.



Eugene K.B. Tan

How can we interpret last Saturday's presidential election result, where Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam swept 70.4 per cent of the popular vote to become the first non-ethnic Chinese to be elected president in a contest?

Given his margin of victory, Mr Tharman undoubtedly scooped up votes from the "oppositionist" camp. His prior People's Action Party (PAP) affiliation did not matter much, given the other sterling qualities he possesses and could bring to the presidency. Earlier concerns that he was "overqualified" for the role also disappeared.

In essence, voters sent a resounding message that prior affiliations, even political ones, should not preclude a candidate from rising above them to be non-partisan as the office of president requires.

They also wanted a president who not only has the requisite experience and ability to be a custodian of Singapore's national reserves and the public service's integrity, but who also has a track record of being a unifying figure.

The vote displayed a call for unity and multiracialism by the Singaporean electorate, as people came together to give former senior minister Tharman an overwhelming mandate.

However, analysis of this election must go beyond what voters approved; of equal significance is what they rejected and what signals that sends.

THE OPPOSITION VOICE?

In this election, voters demonstrated that they do not welcome a politicised presidency,

and that the presidency is not a political prize to be captured for instrumental ends by political parties.

This is highlighted not just by the vote share of the other candidates, but also what they were deemed to stand for. Mr Ng Kok Song, GIC's former chief investment officer, polled just shy of 16 per cent, and this was commendable for someone who was the least known candidate and initially seen as a "planted" candidate.

But it is former NTUC Income chief executive Tan Kin Lian's last-placed finish that stood out simply because of how he built up expectations in the heat of campaigning. Claiming to be a "truly independent candidate", Mr Tan began his campaign with a partisan slant. Despite the president having no policymaking role or power, he promised to be the voice of the people on issues such as costs of living, jobs and housing.

Mr Tan Jee Say, a presidential candidate in 2011 and leader of the now-defunct Singaporeans First party, was his proposer for the nomination papers, and Mr Lim Tean, Peoples Voice leader, his seconder. Other opposition politicians lending their support at this stage included People's Power Party leader Goh Meng Seng.

Midway through the campaign, Dr Tan Cheng Bock, a 2011 presidential candidate and founder of the Progress Singapore Party (PSP), strongly endorsed Mr Tan's candidacy, maintaining that he was doing so in his "personal capacity". The PSP's secretary-general issued a memo to party members assuring them that the party was not endorsing any candidate.

This was followed by other opposition leaders such as Singapore Democratic Party's Dr Chee Soon Juan and Reform Party's Mr Kenneth Jeyaretnam joining arms as "comrades who share a common vision (of) an independent president".

Notably, all of them endorsed

Mr Tan in their personal capacity.

Mr Tan ran a campaign that could be regarded as the antithesis of Mr Tharman's. Mr Tan's share of 14 per cent of the vote this time vastly improved on his 2011 performance, where he had only polled 4.9 per cent, finishing last in a four-way contest and losing his election deposit in the process.

Had the opposition leaders not endorsed him this time, Mr Tan would likely have fared much worse. In other words, the support of the opposition leaders helped win him a vote share he could have only dreamed of.

Ironically, the endorsement of Mr Tan's candidacy by the array of opposition leaders was more counterproductive than helpful in the overall scheme of things. Despite the endorsements, Mr Tan's performance was underwhelming. Even the worst performing opposition parties in the past few general elections had consistently polled a minimum of 20-25 per cent of the popular vote in straight-fight contests against the ruling PAP.

Put simply, most voters did not see the poll as one between the PAP and the opposition, even as Mr Tan and his backers tried to portray it as such. Despite the urging of opposition leaders to vote for Mr Tan, voters exercised their autonomy to decide for themselves which candidate was most suitable to be president all things considered, and firmly rejected the politicisation of the highest office in our land.

Voters who were deciding between Mr Tharman and Mr Ng decided they should not split their votes, and instead pooled their votes for Mr Tharman.

After 30 years since the first presidential election in 1993, voters have acquired a better understanding of the roles and powers of the presidency. In last Friday's election, voters, including reliable opposition voters in a general election, were clear that a presidential election is quite different from a parliamentary election.

It also did not help Mr Tan's cause that his campaign was mired in controversy from the get-go. Just before Nomination Day, his series of "pretty girls" posts came to light. His initial response was that this was a smear campaign by Mr Tharman

and the media. Dr Tan Cheng Bock called the controversy "gutter politics".

In truth, Mr Tan smeared himself with his misogynistic posts; they spoke for themselves. It did not help that he also vented his nativist views by insisting that Singaporeans desired the president and his spouse to be "blue-blooded" Singaporeans – born and bred in Singapore. Mrs Tharman and Ms Sybil Lau, Mr Ng's fiancée, are Singapore citizens although they were not born in Singapore.

NOT A PROXY GE

The effort to politicise the election probably backfired on the opposition leaders who endorsed Mr Tan. (PAP leaders were conspicuous in their non-involvement in the presidential election.)

The palpable FOMO or fear of missing out demonstrated by some opposition leaders' rather late and even grudging endorsements severely undercut the very independence of the presidency they claimed to be advocating. It is worth noting that Mr Tan started and ended his campaign as the only candidate with endorsements from active politicians.

The failed attempt to place their preferred candidate in the

Voters did not pass the opportunity to elect Mr Tharman, whose calibre, standing, character and independence of mind made for a consummate presidential candidate. More importantly, voters knew what was at stake even in a presidential election and were clear-eyed about not short-changing themselves through blind loyalties or succumbing to political manoeuvrings.

Istana does not mean that they lack the capacity to mobilise the oppositionist camp. Rather, they failed to appreciate that voters were determined not to vote for a politicised presidency and that Mr Tan paled in comparison to the eventual winner.

Mr Tharman's victory can be largely attributed to him being a compelling candidate for many Singaporeans. Had the leading candidate from the establishment lacked independent-mindedness and possessed a less than enthralling track record, experience and ability than Mr Tharman, both Mr Tan and Mr Ng would likely have polled better, as the differentiation among the three candidates would have been less distinct.

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There were also sufficient voters, even those with opposition leanings, who appreciated that the presidency must be non-partisan and above the political fray in order for it to be a unifying institution. Voters were genuinely protective of the presidency in an increasingly competitive and diverse political landscape.

That the opposition leaders endorsed Mr Tan in their personal capacity was revealing in itself. But given that many are synonymous with – if not the alter egos of – their parties, running the line that there was no formal opposition backing for Mr Tan's candidature was but a bare fig leaf for the sophistry they had wrapped themselves in. But as the echoes of the presidential election fade and we look ahead to the general election, Mr Tharman's triumph raises a set of important questions.

What does this result mean for the PAP and the opposition's standing heading into the next general election, which is due by November 2025? Was the effort

to back Mr Tan's candidacy a putative attempt to coalesce around an opposition alliance of sorts?

As the Workers' Party is highly unlikely to initiate or be part of an opposition alliance, will Dr Tan and his PSP seek to galvanise the other opposition parties to put aside their differences and egos and pool their resources so that they can provide stiffer competition to the PAP and offer the electorate better candidates and persuasive policy agendas?

SIGNALS FROM VICTORY

Mr Tharman's victory does not indicate that the ground is sweet for the PAP and that the party should go for early polls simply because those assumptions would involve drawing parallels between the incomparable.

In a general election, voters apply different considerations from that in a presidential poll. In a parliamentary system of government, the intrinsic appeal of a capable and honest opposition providing a check and balance against the dominant governing party is highly valued. Government policies will come under intense scrutiny, and whether election promises have been kept evaluated. How the PAP government has governed matters immensely, too. Unlike a presidential election, a general election is an intensive partisan contest for the hearts and minds of the people.

Moreover, the desire for political diversity and competition will only grow.

The presidential election was, however, a vote for unity and common values such as respect across society that must define our social compact. It's a strong signal that all parties cannot afford to ignore.

To voters, Mr Tharman has consistently walked the talk of his election tagline of "Respect for All". Such a resonance with voters highlights prominently their yearnings and aspirations. And the resounding election victory demonstrated vividly why his win is also a victory for Singapore.

This presidential election provides a window to the psyche and aspirations of Singaporeans in this time of transition, with political leadership changes. And it highlights the promise and potential of the Tharman presidency as a bastion of unity, stability and strength.

Eugene K.B. Tan is a law academic at the Singapore Management University and a former Nominated Member of Parliament. He has published works on the elected presidency and testified before the Constitutional Commission in 2016 on selected aspects of the elected presidency.