

COMMENTARY

# How elected officials serving on international bodies promote Singapore's national interest

Besides enhancing its worldwide standing, this also enables the country to influence and shape international norms, policies and law. BY EUGENE K B TAN

AFTER his election as president in September, Tharman Shanmugaratnam said he would review his various international appointments now that he has become Singapore's head of state. He would act on the Cabinet's advice whether keeping the appointments would be in Singapore's interest.

These include chairing the Group of Thirty (G30) board of trustees, co-chairing the OECD Global Commission on the Economics of Water (GCEW) and the advisory board of the UN Human Development Report (HDR), and being a trustee of the World Economic Forum.

It begs the questions: Should our leaders contribute some of their time, energy and expertise to foreign bodies? Should they focus more on domestic priorities and concerns? And how do such appointments serve the national interest?

Earlier this month, an amendment to the Constitution was introduced in Parliament. The proposed law seeks to create a legal framework for the president and cabinet ministers to accept appointments in foreign and international organisations in their private capacities, where they are in the national interest. Such a framework would formalise and regularise such appointments. President Tharman had held these appointments as a minister. The prime minister would have given his permission then for him to contribute his expertise and experience to various international bodies.

The late founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew – when he was senior minister and minister mentor – served for many years as a member of the J P Morgan International Council, alongside former British prime minister Tony Blair, former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger, and former Hong Kong chief executive Tung Chee Hwa.

Singapore's former foreign minister George Yeo served on the Nalanda Mentors Group, established by the Indian government and under the chairmanship of Nobel Prize economics laureate Amartya Sen, to revive Nalanda University as an international educational in-



President Tharman Shanmugaratnam speaking at the recent Singapore Fintech Festival. Singaporeans who are invited to serve on international bodies can be a force multiplier in this regard. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

stitution. Yeo said recently: "I was conscious that I was participating in an individual capacity and not as a Singapore minister. Nevertheless, I had the backing of the Singapore government even after I left government in 2011."

Such ad-hoc approvals were probably adequate in the past, but as the president does not report to the prime minister or the Cabinet, the Prime Minister's Office is not able to grant such approvals.

## Proposed law

For comprehensive coverage, the Bill provides a similar framework for ministers. The law currently does not prohibit ministers from serving in foreign and international organisations in their private capacities.

The proposed law stipulates that three conditions must be satisfied before a president (or a minister) may accept and hold an office in a foreign or international organisation in his private capacity.

First, he must not be disabled from performing the functions of his office.

Second, the Cabinet must advise the president that it is in the national interest for him to accept and hold the office. (For a minister, the prime minister determines if an appointment is in the national interest and gives permission.)

Third, the president, acting in his discretion, must concur with

the Cabinet's advice.

In addition, the Cabinet and prime minister may advise the president and minister, respectively, against saying or doing anything in performing the functions of any office. They must act in accordance with the advice.

Subject to such advice, however, the president acts independently in performing the functions of the office. The president or minister must also relinquish the appointment if so advised by the Cabinet and prime minister respectively. In all cases, the president's and minister's acceptance or relinquishment of any office must be published in the Government Gazette.

In carrying out their responsibilities in international bodies, the proposed law is clear that the president or minister is doing so in his private capacity, notwithstanding that such appointments are in the national interest.

This apparent paradox raises the question of whether state resources can be utilised in areas such as research and background information. This coincides with the need to protect the confidentiality of sensitive, unpublished information that has come to their attention in the course of their official duties.

The Bill is, however, silent on whether the president and a minister can seek or accept any instruc-

tions from an international body. Similarly, it does not specify whether they may seek or accept any gratuity or benefit (including remuneration) in connection with their involvement in a private capacity.

To be clear, the proposed law underscores that public officials carry out their duties and regulate their conduct always bearing in mind the interests of the country and the national (and increasingly, international) character of their duties.

Whether in their public or private capacities, the governance ethos is that elected (and unelected) public officials shall carry out their duties with the highest standards of integrity and loyalty.

They are also expected to conduct themselves with objectivity and impartiality and avoid the appearance of conflict of interest in the performance of their duties. Similarly, they must not act for their own personal benefit or for the benefit of third parties.

## Furthering national interest

The proposed constitutional amendments are timely and recognise that the involvement of our elected leaders in international bodies can be beneficial to Singapore. We won't see many of our elected leaders holding such appointments simply because of the proposed law.

Such appointments should be seen to be in our national interest. International bodies are often the backbone of global cooperation and governance. Whether it is combating Covid-19 or climate change, global consensus and coordination, the formation of international policy, norms and standards all play a critical role in finding common ground for dealing with and solving problems.

Such platforms for sharing information and evidence, exchanging experiences and best practices, forging common approaches, and developing joint legal and declaratory instruments can boost rule-making at the national and international levels.

Having prominent Singaporeans serve on significant or influential international bodies not only

enhances our global standing, it also enables Singapore to influence and shape international norms, policies and law.

For example, take President Tharman's involvement in the UN HDRs. They advocate a human development approach that "(expands) the richness of human life, rather than simply the richness of the economy in which human beings live ... focused on people and their opportunities and choices".

Singapore's human development experience can benefit other countries even as we do not claim to be a model for others.

Similarly, how Singapore has sought to be more water-resilient can benefit others through President Tharman's participation in the GCEW, which seeks to redefine how water is valued and governed for the common good.

The G30 seeks to address the many issues facing both policymakers and market practitioners by deepening "understanding of global economic and financial issues, and to explore the international repercussions of decisions taken in the public and private sectors". President Tharman has been involved in the G30 since 2008 and is its first Asian chair since 2017.

Such policy influence can help Singapore shape the agenda, processes, and perhaps even outcomes on issues important to the country or to promote a particular cause. By being in such fora, Singapore's voice is projected.

We should not be narrow-minded in drawing bright-line distinctions between the domestic and international domains given that we are and have to be plugged into the international global system. Being a country dependent on a thriving global system undergirded by the rule of law, Singaporeans with specialised competencies and knowledge can and should contribute to the world beyond our borders.

In today's complex world, we cannot overcome the global and domestic challenges by acting alone and being inward looking.

At the inter-governmental level, Singapore's diplomats, public officers and academics contribute to international organisations to overcome global challenges in ar-

reas where we have a significant stake. They include global trade and investment rules, intellectual property protection, civil aviation and maritime issues, the environment and climate change.

In being selective in where we can contribute due to our limited resources, our efforts have an outsized impact in promoting and protecting economic, social and environmental well-being for all. Put simply, small states must make themselves relevant by purposefully contributing to the international community through global public goods and tackling trans-boundary issues.

## Domestic concerns

To be clear, our leaders must prioritise concentrating on problems at home, but our foreign and domestic interests are not a zero-sum battle. This is because domestic concerns do not stop at the water's edge. These international issues have clear impact on domestic imperatives and needs. In this regard, international engagement and collaboration are essential – whether at the inter-governmental level or through international bodies.

It should not surprise us if increasingly more Singaporeans feel that Singapore should be more involved in the global community. Through our nation- and state-building process, we have a positive international image globally. By being present on the international scene at the various levels, international engagement gives us heft and amplifies our soft power.

Singapore and Singaporeans have a moral obligation to get involved internationally in areas where we can contribute such as economic development, health policy, artificial intelligence, dispute resolution and social cohesion. Those who are invited to serve on important international bodies can be a force multiplier in this regard. We should be suitably proud of them and support their involvement.

The writer is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University and a former Nominated Member of Parliament