



Singapore's elected president: a failed institution

Garry Rodan

Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

Singaporeans were supposed to go to the polls on 23 September 2017 to elect the country's eighth president. It would have been a fascinating political event—both despite and because of new candidate eligibility criteria and other regulations limiting the pool of possible contestants. This included racially reserving the election for Malay candidates. The contest never happened, though, as the only name on the ballot was Halimah Yacob, endorsed by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). Four other prospective candidates failed to secure eligibility certificates from a government-appointed Presidential Elections Committee. Thus, on nomination day, 13 September, Halimah Yacob was the declared winner and becomes Singapore's first female president.

However, the route to victory comes at a serious cost to both the institution of the elected president, created by the PAP in 1991 to replace purely ceremonial appointed presidents, and to Halimah. Tension between political control and competition inherent to the design of the elected president has long rendered it controversial. Yet this time around, control triumphed so emphatically that it decisively undermined whatever semblance of credibility remained with the institution. Halimah thus enters the position with no more political authority than if she were simply appointed by the government.

Before examining the detail of how and why controls were intensified for 2017, the underlying motives for the PAP's constitutional reform to the institution of the president in 1991 warrant explanation. They were part of a broader agenda of political institution-building over recent decades. The hallmark of this agenda has been the paradoxical combining of new avenues and mechanisms for popular participation with limits on political competition.

This new direction in authoritarian rule followed a 13 percent swing against the PAP in the 1984 general election. Lee Kuan Yew and his younger 'second-generation' ruling party colleagues worried about a possible future 'freak election result' removing it from office. New avenues for participation within PAP-controlled institutions were thus created to dissuade electors from oppositional politics, including nominated Members of Parliament and a diverse, evolving array of public policy consultation mechanisms.

Focus also turned to how PAP opponents' policy options could be circumscribed, and their control over state power restrained, should a change of government ever occur. The role and control of the city-state's considerable financial reserves derived from deposits by the Monetary Authority of Singapore and assets of the extensive range of government-linked companies was considered pivotal. The stated principal rationale behind the

CONTACT Garry Rodan  G.Rodan@murdoch.edu.au

This article was originally published with errors. This version has been corrected. Please see Corrigendum (<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2018.1406836>)

© 2017 Australian Institute of International Affairs

constitutional reform by the PAP government was to guard against a ‘rogue government’ wanting to squander the country’s hard-earned reserves. The new post of elected president carried with it custodial powers over reserves and veto powers over key public service appointments. Elections, it was thought, would give the post commensurate political authority. They were also consistent with the PAP’s attempt to project itself as serious about facilitating greater popular political participation.

Yet the PAP was just as concerned about pre-empting a possible ‘rogue president’, lest participation got out of hand. To this end, qualifying candidates had to have a minimum of three years’ experience as a cabinet minister, chief justice, Speaker of Parliament, attorney general, auditor general, chairman of the Public Service Commission, permanent secretary in the civil service, or chairman or chief executive officer of a company with a paid-up capital of at least S\$100 million. In effect, the post was tailor-made for the PAP establishment. Not surprisingly, Singapore has only witnessed two contested elections: in 1993 and 2011. In 1999 and 2005, there were no qualified challengers to the PAP-endorsed candidate. Nevertheless, things have not always gone quite to plan. This carefully crafted institution has generated unintended consequences.

Departing from the script

The first election in 1993 was a drab and bizarre affair. The PAP-endorsed former secretary general of the PAP-affiliated National Trades Union Congress and deputy prime minister, Ong Teng Cheong, prevailed. Yet his opponent, the former accountant general, Chua Kim Yeow, attracted 41.31 percent of the vote, despite describing Ong as ‘the far superior candidate’ (Chong and Seow 2016). Evidently, some voters simply wanted to support a candidate who was not PAP-endorsed. From the outset, then, many Singaporeans expressed their disdain for the constrained nature of political competition. Support for Chua was a form of protest vote.

However, Ong proved in office to be more serious about his custodial role than was expected or appreciated by the authorities. Indeed, he exposed and challenged a fundamental absence of transparency necessary for his role. Ong thought it pertinent to establish the extent and nature of the reserves he was meant to protect. He wrote to the government about this after the bureaucracy appeared to him to be dragging the chain on providing such information. In response, the government claimed that it would take ‘56 man-years’ to provide the information Ong wanted. Ong did eventually receive information over the following three years, but regarded it as incomplete (Mitton 2000).

Uncertainty about Ong’s future health, following treatment for cancer, meant that the PAP was able to look for a different candidate to endorse for 1999. However, this would not be the end of surprises for the ruling party. In 2011, four candidates contested, all with the family name of Tan. The PAP-endorsed former deputy prime minister, Tony Tan, won by just 0.35 percent over a former PAP backbencher with grass-roots links, Tan Cheng Bock. Arguably, support for him was a shot across the bow at the PAP elite and its acute ideology of meritocracy rationalising tight concentration of power among technocratic ruling elites. This had appeal to some traditional supporters of the government, as well as among its critics. Tony Tan’s mere 35.20 percent of the vote—despite the mobilisation of the government-controlled media and his strong performance record as a minister—again highlighted the appetite of many voters for candidates not endorsed by the

PAP. Adding to the PAP's concerns was the fact that Tan Jee Say—an investment advisor and former public servant who had contested the May general election that year for the opposition Singapore Democratic Party—had qualified for the presidential election and secured 25.04 percent of the vote.

The 2011 election was also more explicitly politicised. Some candidates raised policy issues and agendas that were beyond the powers of the president, including suggestions on how to use reserves. There were online campaigns, public rallies and lively debates. Such attempts to harness the elected president to a broader and more combative political contest were antithetical to the purpose behind the PAP's shift from an exclusively ceremonial post to the elected president. It wanted a modicum of political competition among establishment figures to bestow authority to an office that could limit the powers of any non-PAP government. Much of what happened in 2011 was surplus to requirements.

Against this background, there was serious critical reflection about the elected president by the PAP, leading to a further tightening of regulations on candidate eligibility and the conduct of debate in preparation for the 2017 presidential election.

Control's triumph and cost

In 2016, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong appointed a Constitutional Commission to review the elected presidency, culminating in a string of important reforms passed by Parliament late that year. These included: raising the eligibility criteria for private sector candidates, permitting only executives of a company with at least S\$500 million in shareholders' equity; reserving an election for a particular racial group (in this case, Malays) where a president from that group has not been elected over five consecutive terms; a requirement that the president must consult an enlarged government-appointed, unelected Council of Presidential Advisors before exercising discretionary powers; new rules that limit electioneering; and a form for candidates to voluntarily declare that they will campaign in a dignified and decorous manner consistent with the president's position (whether the candidate signs it or not is made public with the nomination papers).

These changes combined to further shrink the pool of candidates that could qualify in 2017, and could potentially restrain a maverick president should the need arise. However, finding interested and qualified private sector Malay candidates proved especially difficult, given the disproportionate number of Malays of low socio-economic status in Singapore. Two private sector candidates did publicly declare their intentions to contest—chair of Bourbon Offshore Asia Pacific, Farid Khan, and chief executive officer of Second Chance Properties, Salleh Merican. Yet neither presided over at least S\$500 million in shareholders' equity. Moreover, Khan's Singapore identity card described him as 'Pakistani', while Merican hailed from India and his mother was born in Malaysian Borneo.

Neither Khan nor Merican succeeded in obtaining certificates of eligibility from the Presidential Elections Committee, which can take account of ethnic cultural considerations—namely, whether a candidate thinks of himself or herself as a 'Malay', and is accepted as 'Malay' by that community. Nor did the Presidential Elections Committee exercise its discretion to qualify these candidates via a deliberative track—where their private sector experiences are considered comparable to the automatic criteria. This

provision had paved the way for Tan Jay See to contest in 2011. Up until then, however, multiple candidates could have been expected to work in favour of the PAP-endorsed candidate, serving to fragment votes for other contestants. Furthermore, with calls among critics of the new restrictions in 2017 for vote-spoiling in protest, any contest at all now risked embarrassment for the PAP.

The introduction of the racially reserved election was especially controversial, attracting legal and political challenges. The PAP presented the reserved election as a far-sighted measure to try and prevent xenophobic tendencies, racism and tribalism of the sort sweeping through many Western countries (Shanmugam 2017a). President Tony Tan gave his public support to the move to entrench multiculturalism in the highest office in the land by ensuring members of the city-state's main races periodically occupy it. 'Singapore is a target for terrorists', he observed. In the event of an attack, he continued:

It is very important to ensure we do not allow it to destroy our cohesion, or to have tensions between the various communities. In that respect, reserving this election for the Malay is appropriate—unfortunately because of these circumstances around the world which Singapore is caught up in (Hussain and Seow 2017).

To be sure, with 74 percent of the population racially Chinese, the question of adequate representation of Malay, Indian and other minorities is an issue. The PAP leaders are right to insist that race is not insignificant to voter preferences in Singapore. But this does not mean that the problem is best addressed by further reifying racial categories and concepts of citizenship. The PAP's institutions and ideologies have for many decades systematically fostered racial political consciousness—including through identity cards, public housing policies and state-sponsored community self-help groups. This serves to ideologically and politically fragment Singaporeans, and to militate against sustained debate about the structural foundations of, and impediments to addressing, the social and economic inequalities in Singapore affecting all races to differing degrees.

Importantly, the reserved election aroused criticisms in social media of the PAP's conception of multiculturalism and the perpetuation of racial politics (Online Citizen 2017). But it backfired even more fundamentally in precipitating social media reactions grounded in racial prejudice and stereotypes of minority races in Singapore (George 2017). Instead of the reserved election helping to advance social cohesion, its immediate effect was to precipitate some of the tension that the PAP was trying to avert.

One of the most fascinating avenues for this tension centred on the government claim that the reserved election and tightened eligibility criteria married two foundational PAP and Singapore values: multiculturalism and meritocracy. Many Chinese Singaporeans expressed concern about the compromising of meritocracy through de facto racial affirmative action. This was a curious line of attack, given that in the last decade the PAP's ideological myth of meritocracy had faced growing popular scepticism among Singaporeans in general. Now it was something that had to be protected above all else. For its part, the PAP eschewed the very term 'affirmative action', instead referring to 'interventionist' measures that contrasted with *laissez-faire* approaches to race relations (Shanmugam 2017b).

Crucially, contention over the racially reserved election was broadened and exacerbated by the fact that it prevented the racially Chinese Tan Cheng Bock from contesting. Tan

mounted an unsuccessful legal challenge and appeal over the government's calculation of when the five consecutive terms without a Malay president started. The government included the term of appointed president Wee Kim Wee, who was in office when the constitutional reform to an elected president occurred. Opposition parties and others also argued that the clock should start ticking from the office of the first actually elected president. The blocking of Tan's candidacy gave the impression that space for loyal opposition—within the PAP as much as outside it—has no more place in post-Lee Kuan Yew Singapore as during it.

Halimah Yacob thus begins her presidency without facing an election and amidst government-controlled media projections of her as fiercely independent. She is, however, a blue-ribbon PAP activist and politician who spent 33 years working for the National Trades Union Congress and subsequently served as a Minister of State and as Speaker of the House in the PAP-dominated Parliament. Her record of solid public service, and the mobilisation of support for her from the National Trades Union Congress, would have made her extremely hard to beat had an election been held. However, the experience of the 2011 presidential election so spooked the PAP and authorities that Halimah was denied this opportunity.

The restrictions placed on the elected president institution have thus undermined the very purpose it was meant to serve: affording a president political authority to potentially exercise significant discretionary veto powers. Yet Halimah has no popular mandate to act as a check on any government—PAP or otherwise. Meanwhile, many Singaporeans who initially took seriously the projection of the elected president as an opportunity for popular participation, or sought to exploit it to that end, have experienced new levels of frustration and become more cynical about the elected president. While government-controlled media were writing about 'president elect' Halimah Yacob, in social media the term 'president select' was widespread.

Halimah's presidency obviates the need for another racially reserved election for the foreseeable future. But public disquiet about the reforms that produced just one qualified candidate in 2017 has sown the seeds for a different, competing reform agenda: the return to an appointed president. This was already the explicit position advanced by Sylvia Lim of the opposition Workers' Party during debate over the latest constitutional reforms. Ironically, a measure conceived and rationalised by the PAP to curtail a non-PAP government in the event of a freak election could be feeding into greater support for the opposition. Moreover, since the global financial crisis and in its response to public concerns about inequality, the PAP has also increasingly dipped into Singapore's reserves in new redistributive programs.

Other institutional initiatives to incorporate more Singaporeans into state-controlled political institutions have enjoyed some success, notably in diverting civil society forces away from integration with opposition political parties and the formation of cohesive, independent reform movements. The nominated Members of Parliament scheme is among the more successful and enduring of such examples. By contrast, the elected president is one initiative where the PAP may have been too clever by half. The unintended consequences of the institution have so alarmed the PAP that it has decisively reasserted political control over the elected president process.

The institution now fails to serve the PAP's original aims of bolstering the president's political authority. It also fails the aims of Singaporeans who sought to harness the elected president's limited competitive elements to forms of protest against PAP power.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Garry Rodan is the Director of the Asia Research Centre and Professor of Politics and International at Murdoch University.

References

- Chong, Zi Liang, and Bei Yi Seow. 2016. "Chua Kim Yeow, Candidate in Singapore's First Presidential Election, Dies." *Straits Times*, August 22. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/candidate-in-spores-first-presidential-election-dies>.
- George, Cherian. 2017. "The Singapore Presidential (s)election: A Monumental Miscalculation." *Mothership.sg*, September 15. <https://mothership.sg/2017/09/a-monumental-miscalculation/>
- Hussain, Zakir, and Joanna Seow. 2017. "President Tony Tan Reflects on His Six Years at the Istana: 'It's Been Hard Work but ... Very Rewarding.'" *Straits Times*, August 27.
- Mitton, Roger. 2000. "Maverick Politician: Ong Teng Cheong Is Out but Not Down." *Asiaweek*, March 10. <http://edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/magazine/2000/0310/nat.singapore.org.html>.
- Online Citizen. 2017. "Readers Shut Down ST's Article Criticising Questions over 'Malayness' of Would-Be Presidential Candidates." July 21. <https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2017/07/21/readers-shout-down-sts-article-to-criticise-malayness-of-would-be-presidential-candidates/>.
- Shanmugam, K. 2017a. "The Need to Secure the Position of Minorities, Common Space." *Straits Times*, February 2. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/the-need-to-secure-position-of-minorities-common-space>.
- Shanmugam, K. 2017b. "Reserved Elections 'Critical as President Serves Unifying Role': Shanmugam." *Straits Times*, September 9. <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/reserved-elections-critical-as-president-serves-unifying-role>.