

A non-election for Singapore's new president

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The government of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong is due to install its preferred candidate, S.R. Nathan, as Singapore's second state president today. The process by which Nathan came to be “elected” provides an insight into the anti-democratic character of the Singapore regime and the nervousness of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) at allowing any channel for expressing opposition.

On August 18, the “election” was over even before it got started. The PAP cabinet simply declared that Nathan was the only candidate “qualified” to run for the position. Two other candidates—Democratic Progress Party leader Tan Soo Phuan and a private tutor, Ooi Boon Ewe—were found to be ineligible.

The qualifications for a presidential candidate assure that the PAP can pick and choose who will be the head of state. To enter the contest, candidate must have headed a ministry, a government statutory board or a \$S100 million (\$US60 million) company for at least three years. Given that Singapore has been a virtual one-party state since 1963, a candidate has to be either a leading PAP member or a wealthy businessman.

It was possible that the outgoing president Ong Teng Cheong might have run a second time. But after a public brawl with the government, he was persuaded not to stand. Ong accused ministers and bureaucrats of preventing him from carrying out his tasks which include overseeing key public appointments and the country's financial reserves. Goh claimed that the government had withdrawn support for Ong because of the latter's health. Ong, however, had declared in July that he was “physically fine”.

As a result, Singapore was treated to the absurd spectacle of Nathan addressing a political meeting in which he thanked people for supporting his campaign although there were no rivals, no campaign and no poll.

The post of “elected” president was only created in 1992 after changes to the country's constitution

engineered by former Prime Minister and “Senior Minister” Lee Kuan Yew. After small electoral gains by opposition parties, Lee argued that it was necessary to establish reserve powers for a president as a guarantee against a future “rogue government”. There was the possibility, he argued, that “opportunists and adventurers” would deplete the country's substantial financial reserves.

In 1993, to make a show of an election, a former auditor-general Chua Kim Yeow was persuaded to stand by the PAP government against their endorsed candidate Ong Teng Cheong. Chua not only refused to campaign but publicly called Ong a “far superior candidate”. Despite this show of modesty, Chua won a substantial 41.3 percent of the vote, as electors used the opportunity to show their hostility to the PAP government.

President Ong was never meant to be anything more than a political ornament—a guarantee against the unlikely possibility that the opposition made any further gains in Singapore's tightly controlled elections. Ong, however, a former deputy prime minister, decided to use his powers and requested that the government provide a full inventory of government assets and reserves. The Auditor-General procrastinated, saying it would take 52 man-years to compile such a list, and setting the stage for ongoing tensions.

The PAP cabinet has been decidedly more cautious this time around, making sure that only its hand-picked candidate would get the post. Nathan headed the country's security service in the 1970s, served as Ambassador to the United States and heads the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.

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The PAP has held a tight grip on political power in Singapore since independence from Britain in 1963. During the last national elections, voters were told that

any ward that voted for opposition candidates would not receive government funds. The PAP has used legal action to intimidate its opponents, taking them to court in libel suits with the intention of bankrupting them.

But the installation of Nathan as president indicates that the PAP is very sensitive to the possibility that an election would have become a vehicle for discontent. The credibility of the government, which justified its rule by pointing to its economic record, has taken a battering as a result of the Asian financial crisis. Workers have been hit by pay cuts and job losses.

Further sackings are expected in the electronics industry, which is at the centre of Singapore's manufacturing. In the first quarter of this year, the average sale price of electronic goods fell by 52 percent compared to the year before. This year 10,000 workers are expected to be laid off by electronic manufacturers, adding to the 29,086 sacked last year. The world's largest manufacturer of computer disk drives, Seagate Technology International, is to cut its workforce in Singapore by 1,600—10 percent of the total.

No doubt the PAP government is concerned that an election, even one as contrived as the selection of president, may become a focus for opposition.



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