Process too politically charged?

By Ho Kwon Ping
For The Straits Times

Like every Singaporean of voting age, I’m going to the polls again tomorrow, and there is a strange sense of déjà vu. Although the contest for our next Elected President has a slightly different format, the campaign has become increasingly like a proxy for the recent General Election.

What I had feared and forewarned publicly was that, regardless of the constitutional definition of the president’s powers, the process of direct elections has the taste and feel of electoral politics, with all its heated debate on overtly political issues.

This has indeed come to pass. As the campaign became increasingly competitive, candidates who wanted to differentiate themselves have made proposals which clearly belong more to the realm of parliamentary politics.

Is this what we really want? The history of directly elected presidents in other countries has inevitably led to political parties nominating or backing their own candidates, and Singapore is in danger of going down the same path.

No doubt each candidate has profusely emphasised his own independence from any political party, but the political overtones have been hard to miss. People have in fact talked about a “by-election effect” to the presidential election – the point being that if indeed the president’s role is largely custodial and ceremonial, there is no harm to using one’s vote to send a signal to the ruling party. The presidential election runs the danger of becoming a referendum on the PAP’s governance, rather than a vote for the best person for the job.

Singaporeans need to step back and ask ourselves if we want this election to heighten the divisiveness which has become quite stark after the general elections. My own view is that the presidency should not become politicised - which it has the clear danger of becoming, if one notices the increasingly bitter online chatter about the contest.

The future of Singapore politics is of vital concern to every Singaporean, but the battle for the minds of the electorate properly belongs in the realm of parliamentary elections. Having it spill over into presidential election cannot be good for us as a nation - it only further divides us, and means Parliament’s role as the proper arena for political debate.

The joke which has become a cliché is that we all already know the outcome of the elections – we will have a President Tan. Which Tan is of course of critical importance for the next six years, but perhaps of even greater importance is the need to review the process of direct elections for the president, and to substitute it with a less politically heated but nevertheless equally representative process.

There are many ways to achieve this, and we should start reviewing alternatives right after our next president is elected, rather than sweep it under the carpet for another six years. The political atmosphere may be even more divided by that time, making any national consensus more difficult to achieve.

For now, the task ahead is to choose a candidate who has the greatest trust of the people and the best credentials for the job. Unfortunately, the official name for today - Cooling Off Day - implies the cut and thrust of parliamentary elections.

We should step back, reflect, and make a cool-headed decision instead.

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