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The Man Who Holds The “Second Key”: Multiracial Singapore Wins a Presidential Election

The author writes that Tharman Shanmugaratnam’s landslide victory in the presidential election in September 2023 suggests that Singaporeans are less interested in their president’s former political affiliations than in how well he can ensure the future of a tiny island city-state in an increasingly unstable world. Latif adds that the future cannot but be a multiracial one. Tharman’s ethnicity, he explains, did not propel him to victory. It was the absence of ethnically-based political choices among the majority Chinese that did so.

In September 2023, the Indian-origin Tharman Shanmugaratnam became Singapore’s first non-Chinese presidential candidate to win a contested election. The presidency is an interesting institution within Singapore’s system of parliamentary democracy. Since 1993, it has ceased to be a ceremonial office and has become a popularly-elected one which has the mandate of acting as a second key (the first key being held by the government) in protecting the national reserves from misuse and

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of preserving the integrity of the civil service through oversight of important appointments to it. Hence, although Singapore's elected presidency is not of the American or French kind, which gives the head of state executive powers, it nevertheless is more powerful than the presidency in many democracies because of its custodial functions.

The elected presidency was devised to prevent a future elected government from buying its time in office by frittering away the nation's substantial and hard-earned reserves on populist and economically infeasible policies. It was meant not to act as a check on the government but to exercise its custodial functions over reserves and key civil service appointments. In order to do so, the president needed the legitimacy of being elected by the people. Several presidents under the system were elected unopposed given the stringent eligibility criteria determining who could run. Tharman was challenged by two candidates. He won 70.4 percent of the vote against their combined 29.6 percent in a country where ethnic Chinese comprise an overwhelming 74.3 percent of the population, ethnic Malays constitute 13.5 percent of it, and Indians account for only 9 percent.

Obviously, then, Tharman's ethnicity did not propel him to victory. It was the absence of ethnically-based political choices among the majority Chinese that did so.

This was to be expected. His meteoric rise in politics, which took him all the way to the role of Senior Minister, was underpinned by his performance in general elections, where he and his team performed exceedingly well in the group representation constituency (GRC) system which Singapore uses to ensure that racial minorities are not left out of parliamentary representation because of political parties' electoral preference for Chinese candidates in a largely-Chinese country. Since every GRC represents a mix of the races, with the Chinese being

predominant in all of them—as do single-member constituencies—Tharman’s popularity was a barometer of how far Singapore had come from the riot-scarred days of the racial 1960s.



Tharman Shanmugaratnam at the World Economic Forum in August 2022. Photo by the courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tharman_Shanmugaratnam_WEF_The_New_Economics_of_Water_screenshot_\(1\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tharman_Shanmugaratnam_WEF_The_New_Economics_of_Water_screenshot_(1).jpg)

To put it bluntly, he was not seen as an Indian called Tharman but as a Singaporean who happened to be an Indian with the name Tharman.

Of course, it was an illustrious name as well. Tharman Shanmugaratnam excelled in sports as well as studies. After his schooling in Singapore, he settled on economics as a profession. He



studied at the London School of Economics and the University of Cambridge, and went on to receive a Master's in Public Administration at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, where he was named a Lucius N. Littauer Fellow for outstanding performance. His professional life saw him being associated with some of Singapore's chief financial institutions, including the Monetary Authority of Singapore (the central bank and financial regulator), the GIC (one of three investment entities that manage Singapore's reserves), and the Economic Development Board. He was finance minister for nine years. He held many other roles as well in the government and was known and respected outside Singapore for his intellectual rigor and political acumen.

However, what impressed Singaporeans more than his academic credentials (which are not rare in Singapore) was his ability to transform learning for oneself into living for others. Tharman's emphasis as a politician on a more compassionate meritocracy struck a chord among many Singaporeans who, while accepting that meritocracy was the best way to distribute economic rewards in society, felt that its elision with elitism foreclosed opportunities for children from disadvantaged families, slow learners and others who found it difficult to keep educational and professional pace with their gifted peers. He himself was an exemplar of educational success, so when he spoke out on behalf of others, he possessed the credibility of realistic empathy coming from an icon of the meritocratic system. That helped him as a politician who now occupies the highest office of the land, which requires him to serve as a unifying figure for Singaporeans above the political fray. Although associated throughout his political career with the ruling People's Action Party (which has ruled Singapore uninterruptedly since 1959) he resigned from it, and from his positions as a Member of Parliament and



therefore a minister, to contest the presidential election. His landslide victory suggests that Singaporeans are less interested in their president's former political affiliations than in how well he can ensure the future of a tiny island city-state in an increasingly unstable world. That future cannot but be a multiracial one.

It would not be improper to say that multiracial Singapore won along with Tharman. As for the 30 percent who did not vote for him, they can be reassured that he will look after their interests precisely because Singapore is a multiracial country.

President Tharman will amplify Singapore's interests in a world where ethnic identity politics, great-power dissonance and economic fractures in the fabric of globalization threaten all nations but particularly a small state like Singapore. As Tharman embarks on his presidential journey, he carries a massive mandate drawn from the overwhelming swathe of society.

He needs it because Singapore requires consensus within to face up to discord outside its borders.

Note on the Author

Asad Latif is an editorial writer for *The Straits Times*, Singapore. He is the Co-General Editor of the 50-volume Singapore Chronicles series, and the author of several books, including *Between Rising Powers: China, Singapore and India* (2007), *Three Sides in Search of a Triangle: Singapore-America-India Relations* (2008), *India in the Making of Singapore* (2008), and *Lim Kim San: A Builder of Singapore* (2009). He graduated with Honours in English from Presidency College in Kolkata, was a Chevening Scholar in History at Cambridge, and was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Harvard. He served on the editorial committee of the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* and was a member of the president's committee of

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