GE2025: Do former civil servants make good politicians? Analysts weigh in

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Political parties have always tapped into the vast pool of public service officers while looking for new faces to contest the general election.

With election round the corner, there has been a spate of resignations by high-ranking officials recently, prompting speculation that they could be fielded as candidates in the coming General Election.

On Tuesday (March 25), the Public Service Division announced that Shawn Loh, the 2024 and 2025 Budget director, and Goh Hanyan, who oversaw Singapore's Smart Nation and artificial intelligence policies, have stepped down.

In the past two weeks, other high-ranking senior civil servants have also left, including Deputy Secretary Jasmin Lau from the Ministry of Health and Foo Cexiang, a director at the Ministry of Transport.

Resignations apart, two permanent secretaries, Jeffrey Siow from the Ministries of Manpower and Trade and Industry, and Tan Ching Yee from the Ministry of Finance will soon retire after decades of service, probably paving their entry into politics.

Several analysts told AsiaOne on Wednesday (March 26) that it remains to be seen whether the recently resigned and retired civil servants will make competent politicians if they are called upon to contest the election.

Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, an adjunct principal research fellow with the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said that the timing of their resignations suggests that they could be potential candidates.

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP), for instance, has traditionally tapped public service leaders when sourcing for candidates.

"I reckon it's because (former high-ranking civil servants) would be known to the party leadership — their temperament, character, ability and quality after working closely with them in one or more ministries," said Assoc Prof Tan.

"I believe the younger ones who stepped down are more likely to be nominated as candidates, perhaps serving as junior office holders (if elected). The 'retirees' will likely be key office holders."

Teo Kay Key, research fellow at IPS Social Lab, said that with their experience in policymaking, ex-civil servants are likely to take less time to get used to the work that parliamentarians do, such as setting policies.

"People who enter the public service usually already have a motivation to serve the country to some degree, and that inclination is also something the PAP is looking for in their candidates," she said.

On their relevant experience in various ministries, independent political observer Felix Tan said that this trait is a factor for the ruling PAP when comes to selecting candidates for a general election.

"Having held management positions that would require them to make important decisions on a day-to-day basis, the PAP is able to tap on these public servants to ensure the smooth running of the state," Dr Tan added.

Leading up to the 2020 General Election, Tan Kiat How, who was then chief executive of the Infocomm Media Development Authority, stepped down from his post on June 20, three days before the writ of election was issued.

He is currently the Senior Minister of State for Digital Development and Information.

Others then were Yip Hon Weng, former group chief of the Silver Generation Office under MOH, who is now Yio Chu Kang SMC MP, and Eric Chua, who was the Chairman of the People's Association Youth Movement's Central Youth Council and is currently the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Culture, Community and Youth and Social and Family Development.

Opposition parties, too, have fielded former civil servants during the general election.

Non-constituency Member of Parliament Hazel Poa, who is the vice-chair of the Progress Singapore Party, was previously at the Ministry of Finance and the Prime Minister's Office.

Leon Perera, former Workers' Party MP, had worked in the Economic Development Board where he was involved in policy planning that supported Singapore's regional investments.

Those who are chosen to stand often resign in the lead-up to the election, as they are not allowed to participate in political activities while in service.

"Singaporeans have traditionally been quite open to political candidates having public service experience, because they look at it as having relevant experience for being a parliamentarian and to participate in the work of agencies," said Teo.

"These resignations also indicate that there are rules in place in the public service about public servants not participating in partisan politics."

'Parachute' candidates?

Amid the string of resignations of civil servants, several netizens have mockingly suggested that they will be "parachuted" into constituencies.

Political observer Dr Tan said that such a label is justified, given that being potentially first-time candidates, some of these former high-ranking civil servants might be "parachuted" into safe constituencies where there are anchor ministers.

"However, it does not necessarily imply that it will be an automatic shoo-in either," he added.

Dr Tan recalled how PAP candidate Ong Ye Kung, whose resume included being a principal private secretary, was "parachuted" into Aljunied GRC during the 2011 General Election. But the team, led by then-Foreign Minister George Yeo, lost to the Workers' Party.

Ong later won in the 2015 General Election as part of the winning five-member PAP slate in Sembawang GRC.

While “parachute” has a negative connotation, Teo of IPS Social Lab said that every candidate, including those who were from the public service, would “definitely” have some merits to be chosen to run.

“As Singaporean voters do want to see highly-qualified candidates in Parliament, having impressive resumes or portfolios would be one plus point for them,” she added.

“To further win votes they probably will have to display effort in connecting with voters, and showing that they have knowledge of the issues that voters are concerned about.”

‘Up to Singaporeans to decide’

Analysts said that if they move into politics, there is plenty to do in a short space of time.

"They will need to get to know the constituencies they are running in with the little time they have between being announced as a new candidate and Polling Day," said Teo.

"Grassroots work might also be quite different from the nature of work they are used to, so it could be another aspect that they might need some adjustment to."

Dr Tan agreed that they will have to "make themselves known" to voters during the campaign — should they choose to run for politics.

"In order for them to win votes, and thereby get the recognition — perhaps for political mileage — will be to engage residents in a honest manner and with conviction, instead of simply relying on 'star power' of the constituencies' anchor minister," he said.

Elvin Ong, an assistant professor at the National University of Singapore's Department of Political Science, said that whether these former civil servants would make good politicians is up to Singaporeans to decide heading into the polls.

"Some might argue that because they are from the bureaucratic system, they might be naturally more conservative in policymaking and might exhibit group think. Whether this is really the case will be up to Singaporeans to evaluate," he added.

However, Assoc Prof Tan pointed out that while former civil servants are partisan once they enter politics, it does not mean "they have to be yes-men or women".

"I believe they will play their part well by putting their critical thinking cap and sharing their views to contribute towards strengthening governance," he said.

Speaking to reporters on Wednesday at the end of his two-day visit to Hanoi, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said that he is glad that “some public servants” have indicated their willingness to enter politics.

“At the same time, we continue to recruit from all different sectors, not just within the public service. We also have candidates from the private and people sectors, from academia and many other areas,” Wong, who is the PAP’s secretary-general, added.

But Dr Tan has a warning for all former civil servants looking to join politics.

"They will be heavily scrutinised by voters and Singaporeans more so than ever. They will now be in the limelight and their personal lives will be made public," he said.

"And if they do not get elected, what’s next for them?"