

East Coast, Jalan Besar GRCs to be ‘hotly contested’ in next GE with anchor ministers stepping down

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As the dust settles from the latest Cabinet reshuffle, including the news that three veteran ministers will be stepping down from May 1, political analysts have identified two Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) - East Coast and Jalan Besar - to watch come the next general election, which is due by January 2021.

Mr Lim Hng Kiang, Mr Lim Swee Say and Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, the current Minister for Trade and Industry (Trade), Minister for Manpower and Minister for Communications and Information, respectively – will be stepping down from the Cabinet to allow the younger, fourth-generation leaders to take on more responsibilities.

Mr Lim Swee Say and Dr Yaacob are the anchor ministers for East Coast GRC and Jalan Besar GRC, respectively, and their departure from Cabinet will leave these constituencies without an anchor minister.

Mr Lim currently leads the People Action Party's (PAP) four-member East Coast GRC team which comprises Dr Maliki Osman, Ms Jessica Tan and Mr Lee Yi Shyan. But this GRC has been a traditional hot spot at the ballot box.

In the 2015 General Election, this PAP slate secured nearly 61 per cent of the popular vote against what was widely regarded as a relative strong up-and-coming slate from the Workers' Party (WP) comprising Dr Daniel Goh, Mr Gerald Giam, Mr Leon Perera and Mr Mohamed Fairuz Shariff.

In both 2011 and 2015, the WP showing in East Coast GRC earned them a Non-Constituency MP (NCMP) seat – which is traditionally awarded to those who polled the highest percentage of votes among losers at the general election if the minimum number of opposition members returned are not met.

The NCMP seat is currently held by Mr Perera, who is a member of the WP central executive committee and also heads the party's Youth Wing. His East Coast GRC running mate, Dr Goh, is also a NCMP, having taken Ms Lee Li Lian's spot after she declined the position despite being the "best loser" in the previous general election.

Meanwhile over at four-member Jalan Besar GRC, Dr Yaacob leads a PAP team comprising Mr Heng Chee How, Ms Denise Phua and Dr Lily Neo. They secured nearly 68 per cent of the popular vote against a WP team comprising Ms Frieda Chan, Mr L Somasundaram, Mr Redzwan Hafidz Abdul Razak and Mr Sim Tian Hock.

Anchor ministers not needed?

Singapore Management University's associate professor Eugene Tan told Channel NewsAsia the PAP will “certainly be looking hard and carefully” at East Coast and Jalan Besar GRCs.

One possibility is that other members in these GRCs will step up to lead the team at the next general election, Prof Tan said.

In East Coast GRC, for instance, 52-year-old Dr Maliki, who is concurrently Senior Minister of State at the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, could anchor the team. He entered politics in 2001 and was elected an MP of Sembawang GRC, before being promoted into Cabinet in 2004 as Parliamentary Secretary of Ministry of Health and then Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. His other postings were at the Ministry of National Development.

Likewise, Mr Heng, who will assume the position of Senior Minister of State for Defence come May, could play the same role over at Jalan Besar, he said. The 56-year-old was elected to be MP in the same year as Dr Maliki, but had cut his teeth in politics earlier by contesting the 1997 General Election against WP's Low and lost.

He joined the National Trades Union Congress in 1995, where he is currently deputy secretary-general. He was promoted into the Cabinet in 2004 as Minister of State for Trade and Industry and has since held similar appointments at the Ministry of National Development and Ministry of Health. He's been at the Prime Minister's Office since April 2008, and is currently its Senior Minister of State.

"The PAP will have to assess if the Senior Minister of States can lift the team and get the job done," said Prof Tan.

Such a scenario – of fielding a PAP slate in a GRC without a full minister - is not without precedent in recent elections but only in a GRC already held by the opposition.

In 2015, the PAP sent a team led by a former labour MP Yeo Guat Kwang and comprising four new faces to face the WP heavyweight slate of Mr Low Thia Kiang, Ms Sylvia Lim, Mr Pritam Singh, Mr Chen Show Mao and Mr Muhamad Faisal Manap in the five-member Aljunied GRC, which had been held by the opposition party since 2011.

Despite being dubbed the "suicide squad", the PAP slate secured 49 per cent of the vote in a narrow defeat.

The question is whether the PAP would contemplate such a strategy in a GRC which it currently holds and, if it did, what signal would that send to the residents.

Parachute in a minister?

A more likely scenario would be to parachute in a minister from another constituency to helm the East Coast and Jalan Besar GRCs.

Prof Tan said anchor ministers add weight to a GRC line-up and, by virtue of their higher profiles, signal the PAP's intent in providing leadership to the slate and constituency.

But it also raises the stakes for voters in the GRC – and the PAP.

One narrative that has been advanced by the PAP during past elections has been that if a PAP GRC team led by a minister is not elected – the voters and Singapore at large would suffer the collateral loss of a political office holder slated to lead the nation as part of the 4G leadership.

Despite this argument, in 2011, the PAP slate led by Mr George Yeo, then the Foreign Affairs Minister, and Mdm Lim Hwee Hua, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, were defeated by the WP in Aljunied GRC. Also in the line-up then was Mr Zainul Abidin Rasheed, who was then the Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs.

"Given that East Coast and Jalan Besar GRCs have always been helmed by ministers, voters there may also have the legitimate expectation that the PAP team includes a minister. If there is no minister fielded, the voters' perceptions of how seriously the PAP regard the GRCs and (them) could take a dip," Prof Tan added.

The issue of whether a minister is needed to helm these two constituencies is compounded by the fact that in GE2015, these were the only two PAP GRCs where no new candidates was fielded.

"What's interesting about both these GRCs is that they are very likely to see changes to the line-ups as part of the party's renewal process," Prof Tan pointed out.

PAP does refresh its line-up extensively each time a general election comes around. In GE2011, it fielded 24 new faces while the number in GE2015 was 22.

Another political observer, Dr Gillian Koh, agreed with the possibility of changes in the PAP line-ups in these two GRCs.

"Will new anchor ministers be drawn from areas that are contiguous to these two GRCs – in the case of Jalan Besar, drawn from Tanjong Pagar GRC, and in the case of East Coast, drawn from Tampines GRC or Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC – where the spare talent that is moved can tap on their pre-existing political capital as they helm those newly constituted GRCs?" suggested the deputy director of the Institute of Policy Studies.

One indicator might be to look out for 4G ministers who may be extending their presence by walking the ground in these two GRCs.

A third scenario: A change to the electoral boundaries of these two GRCs. "(There could be) some tweaks to the boundaries to include the political constituencies that have already been nurtured by the new anchor ministers of in neighbouring GRCs," Dr Koh said.

Whatever the outcome may be, Prof Tan said Singaporeans "can expect East Coast and Jalan Besar GRCs to be hotly contested" in the next general election.

As for West Coast GRC, where Mr Lim Hng Kiang is currently the anchor minister, the transition appears to be clearer.

Prof Tan said Mr S Iswaran, who will be moving from Trade and Industry Ministry to helm the Ministry of Communications and Information from May, is "very likely" to take over from Mr Lim. Mr Iswaran has been a member of the West Coast GRC slate since 1997.