

GE2020: Could Senior Ministers Teo or Tharman lead the PAP team in East Coast GRC?

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Channel News Asia, 28 June 2020

The People's Action Party (PAP) could field a heavyweight minister and a new slate of candidates in East Coast GRC for General Election 2020, with former anchor minister Lim Swee Say and three-term representative Lee Yi Shyan both likely to step down.

In particular, eyes are on who will replace former Manpower Minister Mr Lim, with political analysts saying Senior Ministers Teo Chee Hean or Tharman Shanmugaratnam could be in line to take over. Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat has been photographed walking in East Coast as well.

Analysts said the PAP could field a heavyweight minister in East Coast as a signal to voters that it still takes the constituency seriously. East Coast is seen as a traditional battleground between the PAP and the Workers' Party (WP), which usually fields a strong team there.

This is despite a seemingly reduced WP threat in East Coast, said the analysts, after party chief Pritam Singh announced on Friday (Jun 26) that he and Ms Sylvia Lim will again contest in neighbouring Aljunied, shutting down rumours of a move to East Coast.

Mr Lim has declined to comment on whether he is retiring and rumours of Mr Teo or Mr Tharman taking over. Party activists told CNA they have "totally no idea" who might replace Mr Lim. "They're keeping cards close to their chest," one said.

SENIOR MINISTER IN EAST COAST?

Dr Felix Tan, associate lecturer at SIM Global Education, said Mr Teo, who helmed Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC, is a "strong contender" to replace Mr Lim.

"The PAP would probably send someone who is very familiar with voters in the east or at least within that constituency," he said. "He has the gumption and vast political experience to contest there."

Dr Tan added that Mr Teo has strong support in the east and can provide a "heavyweight presence" in a hotly contested GRC.

Associate Professor Bilveer Singh, a political science professor at the National University of Singapore, echoed Dr Tan's views, noting that Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC has been reduced from six seats to five.

"Teo can move to East Coast," he said, adding that the constituency will again come under threat from the WP. "(Voters) in a crisis may just go and support a strong man like Teo Chee Hean. So he may just be the guy."

But Institute of Policy Studies deputy research director Gillian Koh believes Mr Teo is less likely to be moved from Pasir Ris-Punggol, given that he is "already likely to be lending" Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Ng Chee Meng to the new Sengkang GRC.

Mr Teo might need to nurture another 4G minister over the next term if the PAP prevails in Pasir Ris-Punggol, she added.

Instead, Dr Koh said “there is spare capacity to lend Mr Tharman to East Coast”, with Social and Family Development Minister Desmond Lee and junior political officeholder Tan Wu Meng holding the fort in Jurong GRC.

The absence of WP’s Pritam Singh and Sylvia Lim in East Coast will not change PAP’s stance there, Dr Tan believes, predicting that WP could still deploy “star” Nicole Seah and Yee Jenn Jong, a former Joo Chiat Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) with “political expertise”.

After the 2015 election, reports had emerged of Ms Seah being spotted walking the ground in East Coast GRC with WP.

Dr Koh noted that the PAP is unlikely to “simply concede” East Coast by not deploying a heavyweight 4G or 3G minister.

“It will consider what signal it will send to the voters there if a heavyweight minister either from the 3G or 4G cohort is not sent there,” she said.

“The PAP can field a top-flight 4G leader to signal to voters that it is taking them and the tasks of representing them seriously, or they can offer the very best of the 3G cohort to do the same.”

PROMOTION FROM WITHIN

Political observer and law professor Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University (SMU) acknowledged that the WP threat in East Coast is now “somewhat reduced”, adding that moving Mr Teo or Mr Tharman there would not reflect well on the current 4G candidates.

Dr Maliki Osman, who was part of the PAP’s East Coast team in 2015, might step up as Mr Lim’s replacement, he said.

“There is no magic in a heavyweight minister moving to a GRC,” he added. “If the PAP had done a bad job in the constituency (in) the last term, such a minister moved so late in the day is not going to significantly improve the party’s prospects.”

For the upcoming election, East Coast GRC has re-absorbed neighbouring Fengshan SMC, becoming a five-member constituency with 120,238 registered voters, compared to 96,493 previously.

In 2015, PAP defeated the WP in East Coast and Fengshan with 60.7 per cent and 57.5 per cent of the vote respectively. The contest was narrower in 2011, when the PAP won East Coast – which then included Fengshan – with 54.8 per cent of the vote.

ANOTHER HOT CONTEST EXPECTED

The analysts expect another tough fight this year, with WP having contested in East Coast in every election since 2006.

Dr Koh noted that WP’s 2015 East Coast team of Leon Perera, Daniel Goh, Gerald Giam and Mohamed Fairoz Shariff were among the party’s “best losers”. Mr Perera and Assoc Prof Goh went on to become NCMPs.

WP has announced that Mr Goh will not be running this year, while Mr Perera and Mr Giam will run in Aljunied.

“Now that it is clear about the extent to which WP is refreshing its ranks, the question is whether it can find enough strong candidates to present a threat in East Coast GRC and Marine Parade GRC,” said Dr Koh.

Dr Koh said it would perhaps have been better if the WP had built a “greater profile” in East Coast through ground activities over the past few years, especially if it had anticipated the stepping down of heavyweights such as former chief Low Thia Kiang and Chen Show Mao.

On Ms Seah possibly being fielded in East Coast, SIM’s Dr Tan said she will provide “huge star power” for the WP, meaning the PAP will have to find someone who can command the same level of popularity and likeability, “not least youthfulness and energy”.

“Her absence in Singapore’s political landscape has been sorely missed, especially given how passionate her speeches had been in 2011 amongst younger voters,” he added.

“As much as Nicole has matured over the years, her support base has also grown up. However, she will still be able to garner a huge influence, especially amongst younger voters.”

However, SMU’s Associate Professor Tan believes Ms Seah would be “better off” in a new housing estate and a new seat, such as Punggol West or Sengkang.

The question of who WP and PAP will field in East Coast could be up in the air until Nomination Day on Jun 30, he said.

“East Coast has probably fallen down the pecking order where WP is concerned,” he said, adding that the GRC has been a “dilemma” for the party.

“It has been relatively fruitful earning them NCMP seats in 2011 and 2015 but the contests, save for 2011, have never been as close as many had anticipated.”

SURPRISE CANDIDATE

East Coast has certainly not dropped down the pecking order for the PAP, especially as Deputy Prime Minister Mr Heng has been photographed by The Straits Times walking there on two days.

Mr Heng might simply have been in East Coast to lend support to the new team contesting there, Dr Tan said. After all, Mr Heng also visited West Coast GRC on Saturday, where the PAP is set for a challenge with Dr Tan Cheng Bock’s Progress Singapore Party.

“But with a strong team coming from the WP, I won’t be the least surprised that DPM Heng might move over to East Coast GRC to contest,” he added.

Dr Koh highlighted that Mr Heng’s Tampines GRC has the “spare capacity” of two ministers, the other being Environment and Water Resources Minister Masagos Zulkifli. Tampines is also much closer to East Coast in terms of geographical and cultural proximity, she added.

“Now, it would be one of the leading stories of the election if Mr Heng Swee Keat were to move to this GRC,” she stated.