

Who will helm PAP's Jalan Besar team at GE2020? Ex-anchor minister Yaacob hints at new-look team

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The People's Action Party (PAP) slate in Jalan Besar could see a new leader and some fresh faces, with former anchor minister Yaacob Ibrahim acknowledging that some in his team wish to step down after five terms in government.

But Dr Yaacob, 64, stopped short of saying he would not run in the upcoming General Election, telling CNA on Jun 11 that the decision lies with the party.

"I can only answer by (saying) you have to ask the Prime Minister, the head of the party," he said with a laugh. "I'm operating on the basis that I will continue to manage this constituency. So I'm getting it ready for the next election.

On Tuesday (Jun 23), the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) announced the dissolution of Parliament, paving the way for Nomination Day to be held on Jun 30. The Elections Department (ELD) announced later that Polling Day will fall on Jul 10.

This came shortly after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced in a televised address on Tuesday that he had advised President Halimah Yacob to dissolve Parliament and issue the Writ of Election.

In a Facebook post on Tuesday, Dr Yaacob thanked his grassroots leaders, former colleagues and fellow constituency representatives.

"As of today I am no more a Member of Parliament (MP) with the Singapore parliament as it has been dissolved paving the way for the next general election," he wrote.

"As I turn to the next chapter of my life I will always cherish these past 23 years for the friends I have made and the opportunities it gave me during many trials and tribulations to become a better person."

Dr Yaacob stepped down from his Communications and Information ministerial post in 2018. In February, he thanked Parliament in what appeared to be a farewell Budget speech. He first ran in Jalan Besar in 1997.

With the PAP traditionally fielding an anchor minister in each Group Representation Constituency (GRC), political observers say ministers from neighbouring constituencies could take over. Manpower Minister Josephine Teo and Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Indranee Rajah fit the bill.

The pair served in constituencies helmed by two ministers in the Parliament just dissolved: Mrs Teo and Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC, and Ms Indranee and Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing in Tanjong Pagar GRC.

Senior Minister of State for Defence Heng Chee How, Central District Mayor Denise Phua and five-term backbencher Lily Neo complete the Jalan Besar team.

WHO MIGHT REPLACE YAACOB?

When asked for his thoughts on reports that Mrs Teo might be set to take over, Dr Yaacob remained tight-lipped.

“Again, these are matters for the Prime Minister and the leadership to decide,” he said. “I will just continue with my usual mode. So on nomination day at 12pm, you can ask me and I can answer that question.”

Nevertheless, he acknowledged that “there’s no minister now in Jalan Besar now because I’ve stepped down”, and that he’s confident any potential ministerial replacement “can do the job”.

Dr Yaacob said his team started preparing for the elections four years ago, even before he stepped down as minister, to ensure the “GRC machinery” is in place. This refers to election logistics like identifying polling agents, printing posters and marking out lamp posts.

“I stepped down two years ago, but two years before that I started forming the committee because I said we need to get everything ready,” he added. “So whoever comes in, I think it’s not a problem for him or her to just take on and move on.”

When it comes to moving ministers around, the PAP might look at those from surrounding constituencies, said Dr Gillian Koh, deputy research director at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). Jalan Besar’s new boundaries have also been extended to include some parts of Bishan-Toa Payoh, she noted.

Associate Professor Bilveer Singh, a political science professor at the National University of Singapore, echoed Dr Koh’s sentiments, adding that “there’s already so much synergy within the PAP in these areas”.

Regardless, it would be “highly unlikely” that the PAP does not field an anchor minister in a GRC, said Dr Felix Tan, associate lecturer at SIM Global Education.

Dr Tan said there is “always a possibility” that Mrs Teo could move from her ward in Bishan-Toa Payoh to helm Jalan Besar, especially as Marymount has been hived off as a Single Member Constituency (SMC) for the coming election.

“There is no real need for an anchor minister of such stature to run in an SMC if he or she can be utilised to helm a larger GRC with a slew of fresh faces,” he said.

Experts also noted that the PAP could try to maintain the demographic profile in the current Jalan Besar team, especially as Dr Yaacob is the minority representative there.

Dr Koh pointed to speculation that Mrs Teo and fellow Bishan-Toa Payoh Member of Parliament (MP) Saktiandi Supaat could be moved to Jalan Besar.

Assoc Prof Singh touted Tanjong Pagar’s Ms Indranee as another possibility to anchor Jalan Besar as a minority representative. “She’s president of SINDA (Singapore Indian Development Association), very powerful, and one of the most effective ministers Singapore has,” he said.

WP’S CHALLENGE

Assoc Prof Singh said the PAP might need to send a strong anchor minister to Jalan Besar, given speculation that the Workers’ Party (WP) could break up its Aljunied team and move heavyweight MPs Sylvia Lim and Low Thia Kiang there.

While he said the PAP has done “very well” in Jalan Besar – it has never lost the GRC in its various iterations, and in 2015 defeated WP there with 68 per cent of the vote – the presence of someone like Mr Low means “the game may change”.

“This could probably be Low Thia Khiang’s last round and he may just do a Chiam (See Tong), because he’s not fully well and all that,” he said. “And you also may want to create space for the younger people to take over the Workers’ Party.”

Mr Low, 63, injured his head in a fall at home on Apr 30 before being warded in an intensive care unit, and was on May 4 transferred to a general ward. Party chief Pritam Singh said last Friday that Mr Low is currently recovering steadily at home.

Mr Chiam, 85, was Potong Pasir’s MP from 1984 to 2011. In 2011, he ran and lost with the Singapore People’s Party in Bishan-Toa Payoh. This would turn out to be his last General Election amid poor health.

Assoc Prof Singh said the WP might deploy Mr Low in Jalan Besar, which has some of Singapore’s poorest residents, due to his working class appeal.

WP might also want to diversify its Aljunied slate given that three MPs there are defendants in the Aljunied-Hougang Town Council court case, he added.

Still, the observers believe Mrs Teo is capable of holding her own in Jalan Besar, and that criticisms of how she has handled the COVID-19 outbreak in migrant worker dormitories will likely not affect her there.

“There is very little motivation for huge changes to the status quo,” he added. “Moreover, Singaporeans would be more interested (in) how government policies will affect them in day-to-day life and bread-and-butter issues.”

Assoc Prof Singh called Mrs Teo a “strong candidate”, saying that “historically, people will say people like her did a fantastic job, notwithstanding all the odds against her”.

“Among all the woman ministers she’s the Number 1, other than Indranee,” he added.

NEW FACES IN JALAN BESAR?

Besides Dr Yaacob, observers point out that Dr Lily Neo – also on her fifth term – could step down, paving the way for a new face to be deployed in Jalan Besar. Dr Neo declined to comment.

According to reports, one potential candidate is LinkedIn senior executive Alvin Tan, a long-time volunteer in Dr Neo’s Kreta Ayer-Kim Seng ward. Mr Tan, 39, will also speak at a SkillsFuture webinar on Wednesday with Mr Heng and Ms Phua. Mr Tan did not respond to requests for comment.

When Dr Yaacob was asked if he expects his team to be refreshed given that Dr Neo is already on her fifth term, he said: “I think for some of us, I know that we want to step down because we have done four to five terms.”

“I think we’ve always taken the position that the party makes the final decision. Once the party decides for us to stay, we stay. The party says we go, we go,” he said.

“Meanwhile, where we are now the elected MPs, we just have to make sure that we are ready to fight the next battle and hopefully win handsomely.”

Dr Yaacob said he “can’t say for certain” if the party has identified fresh faces for Jalan Besar, adding that he “won’t go into details”.

“There is a process by which the party will introduce new candidates, and I think the time will come,” he stated.

“So for me, I’m just operating with my current grassroots leaders and MPs. We do have our own WhatsApp group, we keep in touch, we update each other. I think when the new candidates come, you will know.”

While Assoc Prof Singh said he’s not seen new faces in Jalan Besar, he highlighted that the PAP could eventually deploy fresh candidates seen walking the ground elsewhere, as part of an initial strategy to distract the opposition.

“Another alternative is they may send an old-timer who is going to retire,” he added, pointing to how MP Charles Chong ran in Punggol East SMC for his seventh term. “So don’t assume it’s always going to be a new face.”

Dr Tan said the PAP might introduce a completely new slate of candidates in Jalan Besar for leadership renewal. “With an anchor minister helping this, it would be able to ensure some form of continuity for the PAP,” he added.

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE CAMPAIGNS

Still, Dr Yaacob acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic will mean a lot of online campaigning, and that getting Jalan Besar’s many elderly residents online will be a “big challenge”.

“We have to have more online presence, so I think engaging residents now is useful because you build up that sort of modality of engagement,” he said.

“And we want to continue with that during the campaign, obviously, so whoever is the candidate, they’ll probably have a Facebook Live session, a chat session – people can come in and register.”

But Dr Yaacob said candidates have to maintain a physical presence for visibility, given that some residents will be out and about for work and leisure. “So you got to find some way to balance between the social distance and your presence,” he added.

Dr Yaacob pointed to how his team, with the help of donors, has been delivering cooked food to elderly and needy residents during the COVID-19 outbreak. This scheme will run till the end of June, and could be one avenue to “observe and say hello”, he said.

“I think we need to sort of capitalise on all the opportunities that exist,” he added. “And as long as we continue to observe the social distancing measures, I think as a candidate, you have every right to go out in the constituency.”

Assoc Prof Singh said the PAP might have trouble with online campaigning in all mature estates, adding that it could supplement online outreach with brochures and snail mail.

Despite the difficulties, he said Jalan Besar is a “very strong, loyal” constituency, with many old Chinese voters who are “very loyal to the PAP”. The COVID-19 crisis also means Singaporeans across the board will vote in a conservative manner, he said.

“I think the PAP is not worried about Jalan Besar per se,” he added, noting that the party may face similar outreach problems across the rest of Singapore. “But as I said, even though (the elderly) don’t understand, most people will vote with their eyes closed for the PAP.”

Dr Tan said party members can still continue with walkabouts if they adhere to safe distancing measures, allowing them to further reach out to the elderly.

Several PAP MPs were spotted out and about in the heartlands over the weekend, making rounds in small groups to engage residents. On Saturday, Jalan Besar’s Mr Heng and four other volunteers presented care packs to families in Whampoa.

"ENDEAR YOURSELF TO THE RESIDENTS": DR YAACOB IBRAHIM

But with campaign rallies only to be held online, Dr Tan said there is “a huge possibility” that the PAP will maintain its influence on voters, as many would “fall back to the familiar faces” and the “tried and tested political party” instead of opting for change.

Under new campaign rules, political parties and candidates will now get additional airtime on Mediacorp’s Channel 5.

Under so-called “constituency political broadcasts”, SMC candidates will each be given three minutes, while those contesting in a GRC will be given 12 or 15 minutes as a group of four or five respectively.

Dr Yaacob said he is confident about the PAP’s chances in Jalan Besar at the election, although he cautioned that its previous successes don’t guarantee a walk in the park.

“We will continue to work hard right to the last day,” he said, pointing out the importance of fulfilling residents’ needs at meet-the-people sessions and ensuring they understand what candidates stand for through house visits and events.

“I have always told all my younger colleagues when they came into Jalan Besar: Don’t assume just because your predecessors have done well, you will do well.

“Because voters can be very fickle. They might not like the new face, (and say) what happened to the old face? You’ve got to endear yourself to the residents as much as possible. I think we just have to work hard for every vote.”