

Singapore election marks change of guard for PAP and rivals alike

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Political veterans bow out as parties of all stripes amplify new voices

A generational sea change is underway in Singaporean politics, as the ruling People's Action Party and its opponents promote fresh blood ahead of the July 10 election.

Several notable names were absent from the list of candidates nominated on Tuesday.

Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, 79, had revealed last week that he would not stand for reelection. Low Thia Kiang, the 63-year-old previous head of the opposition Workers' Party, has also bowed out as the city-state undergoes what many are calling a "leadership renewal" to appeal to younger voters.

Goh, who has represented his district in parliament for over 40 years, is part of a batch of senior PAP politicians who are withdrawing from the limelight. Joining Goh in retirement are Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan, 67, and former Communications and Information Minister Yaacob Ibrahim, 64. Former Manpower Minister Lim Swee Say, 65, and ex-Trade and Industry Minister Lim Hng Kiang, 66, were also left off the PAP's slate for the polls.

The biggest change may come in the next term after the election, when 68-year-old Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong is expected to step down, likely making way for 58-year-old Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat. The upcoming vote is widely seen as a test of public support for Heng and other PAP politicians known as the "fourth generation" or "4G" team.

The ruling party's drive to refresh its lineup has been years in the making and gradually telegraphed over time, Gillian Koh, deputy director for research at Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies, told the *Nikkei Asian Review*.

"In other words, there are no 'seismic shifts' but gradual, well-staged, stretched-out and highly predictable transitions," she said.

But while the PAP's youth movement has developed over previous election cycles, the 2020 race is highlighting opposition groups' desire to get younger or at least amplify new voices as well.

For the Workers' Party -- the only opposition party represented in the recently dissolved parliament -- 43-year-old party chief Pritam Singh will be leading the charge into an election for the first time.

The upstart Progress Singapore Party is led by 80-year-old former PAP veteran Tan Cheng Bock, who has surrounded himself with a number of political newcomers. Perhaps the highest-profile of them is Lee Hsien Yang, the estranged younger brother of Prime Minister Lee, who had kept his distance from politics but was unveiled as a card-carrying PSP member last week.

Lee Hsien Yang, 62, is not running in the election but is providing a loud, fresh voice from the sidelines of the campaign. He has urged Singaporeans to "vote fearlessly" against the ruling PAP, which he says has "lost its way."

Another opposition group, the Singapore People's Party, will not have veterans Chiam See Tong, 85, or his wife Lina Chiam, 71, contesting in this election. Most consider the husband the bedrock of the party, but he has suffered from ailing health for several years.

The People's Party is now led by Secretary-General Steve Chia, 49, and Chairman Jose Raymond, 48, who previously served under Singapore's current Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan when the minister held the environment portfolio.

Experts say the changes across the political spectrum are a response to younger generations wielding greater clout at the ballot box. Singaporean society is rapidly graying, but more citizens have reached the voting age of 21 since the last election in 2015.

There are 2.65 million eligible voters this time around, up from 2.46 million five years ago.

"Political parties of all stripes realize that they increasingly need to appeal to the younger voters, requiring younger politicians and party leaders," explained Eugene Tan, associate professor of law at Singapore Management University.

Other shifts within the opposition only underscore the sense that this election marks a turning point for Singaporean politics, even if the historically undefeated PAP goes on to win as handily as expected.

The Singapore Democratic Alliance's Chairman Desmond Lim, 53, has signaled his intention to step back after the polls. And the newest political party on the scene is Red Dot United, formed by members who left the still-nascent Progress Singapore Party.

The rise of fresh faces in politics has not been without controversy. A few of the new ruling party hopefuls have faced scrutiny on social media, after netizens claimed to have had negative encounters with them.

Ivan Lim, general manager at oil rig-builder Keppel Offshore and Marine, was to run on a PAP ticket in this election but withdrew after accusations that he had behaved arrogantly in the past. An online petition to remove him from the slate garnered over 20,000 signatures.

Nevertheless, Lam Peng Er, a senior research fellow at Singapore's East Asian Institute, said the online commotion over the PAP's new additions was just a "hiccup" for the ruling party within the grand scheme of the race.

"This is water under the bridge," Lam told Nikkei. "Things like this happen. I mean, everyone has skeletons in the cupboard -- for the ruling party, opposition parties -- so I don't see how this can be an issue."

Prime Minister Lee, who is also the PAP's secretary-general, has defended his party's selection process against criticism that it lacked the rigor necessary to choose candidates who would serve the public's interests.

"I think if we look for the perfect candidate, we will lose many good men and women," Lee said on Monday. "And if we encourage a culture of trial by internet, then we will not find anybody willing to stand and put themselves and their families through this ordeal."