

Voters want a PAP that listens

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Foreign Minister George Yeo's 2 1/2-minute video has gone viral. In it, he admitted that many young Singaporeans "think that the government is arrogant and high-handed".

At the People's Action Party's final rally in the Aljunied group representation constituency (GRC), where he heads a team of five standing for election against a Workers' Party slate, he said the people "feel we are talking at them and not to them".

Deep in their hearts, Singaporeans knew that they needed the PAP, he claimed.

"Without the PAP, there is no Singapore. However, we need a transformed PAP."

Aljunied is seeing the hottest contest in the parliamentary polls and the issues raised there during the nine-day campaign mirror those at the national level.

"We started off with local issues and we have a 10-point development plan," said teammate Zainul Abidin Rasheed, a senior minister in Yeo's ministry.

Voters' main concerns included the cost of living and housing affordability, he noted.

"But the most critical point is how they see the PAP. They want a a PAP that listens more."

And the party has responded.

Addressing the concerns of first-time buyers of Housing Development Board (HDB) flats, for example, National Development Minister Mah Bow Tan said the income ceiling for such buyers, which had not changed for 17 years, would be reviewed within the next six months.

It could be raised from S\$8,000 to S\$10,000 (RM19,485 to RM24,360) per household, depending on the results of a study, he said.

Already, four in five households qualify for such housing - in which 85 per cent of Singaporeans live. And the HDB is building a record 22,000 new flats this year.

In February, the government announced a S\$3.2 billion "Grow and Share" package to help 2.4 million Singaporeans cope with rising inflation. Last month, cash payouts of S\$100 to S\$800 were made to each adult, while older Singaporeans each received Central Provident Fund Medisave top-ups of S\$200 to S\$700.

The package also includes rebates on personal income tax, utilities, service and conservancy charges, bonuses for older low-wage workers and subsidies for families with young children.

During their rallies, opposition parties tapped the resentment many Singaporeans feel about the influx of immigrants. Some 1.1 million foreigners make up one-third of the country's labour force. Locals have complained about competing with them for jobs and for seats on public transports.

Manpower Minister Gan Kim Yong said the influx had not edged middle-income Singaporeans out of jobs or forced them to work for lower pay.

Wages rose by 14 per cent over the past decade after taking rising prices into account, he said, adding that the unemployment rate, as of last June, was a low 2.7 per cent.

In fact, there were more than 20,000 unfilled vacancies for professionals, managers, executives and technicians, he said, while median monthly salaries for full-time local workers had risen from S\$2,030 in 2000 to S\$2,710 last year.

At a lunchtime rally on Tuesday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made a public apology for his government's mistakes, including shortfalls in housing and transport.

"When these problems vex you or disturb you or upset your lives, please bear with us," he said. "We're trying our best on your behalf. And if we didn't quite get it right, I'm sorry but we will try and do better next time."

He said the government had made mistakes over the escape of detained terrorist Mas Selamat from Whitley Road Detention Centre in 2008 and the flooding of Orchard Road last year.

"We acknowledge it and we apologise. We should take responsibility and put things right. We must learn from the lessons and never make the same mistake again."

His frank apology did not appease opposition candidates.

"We are not looking for an apology," declared Png Eng Huat, part of the Workers' Party team contesting the East Coast GRC, at their final rally. "We are looking for accountability, transparency and change."

Accountability had been a key issue during the campaign, said Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow with the Institute of Policy Studies.

"The opposition are saying that with more members in Parliament, they would keep the government accountable."

The public were already doing that, via letters and feedback to the mainstream media and grassroots organisations, she said.

"It is not that they are not heard but, maybe, the answers have not pleased everyone."

Early in the campaign, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew was asked about his comments in his book, *Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going*, about the difficulty of integrating Malays into the community.

He had said in the book that Muslims were "distinct and separate".

The prime minister and other politicians stressed that this was not the government's view and that the Muslim community had made much progress in integration.

Kuan Yew later said: "I stand corrected."

During the campaign, Kuan Yew told a Malay reporter that he would be "very sad" if Malays voted against the PAP because of the comments.

He noted that the government had many affirmative action schemes for the Malays and added that the party's 12 candidates were "the best, well-educated, clean record, honest good candidates".

During the campaign, Hsien Loong noted that Malays were doing better in their O- and A-level examinations and at university.

"You can see it in the economy, in the society, of Malays rising in many careers, doing well in their jobs and succeeding on their own merits."

Nor Lella Mardiiiah, part of the National Solidarity Party's team contesting the Chua Chu Kang GRC, said the minister mentor's comments "created a lot of disappointment in the Malay and Muslim community. The Malay community is integrated. Our religion has not restricted us from integrating".

But, she added, she had succeeded in building up her career as a business consultant "in a company which did not discriminate against me and sponsored me to earn a diploma".

For the Malay community, she said, the influx of foreign workers was one of the main issues and the "broad perspective is that all Singaporeans are facing such problems".

Nazem Suki, the former secretary-general of the Singapore Malay National Organisation, agreed: "Malays are not satisfied about housing, the high cost of living and jobs - but everyone has the same worries. We are at par with the other races."

(Nazem had left his party to contest as an independent in the Tanjung Pagar GRC, but the team missed the deadline on Nomination Day).

The contest in Aljunied includes two wards with a proportion of Malay voters higher than the national average of 14 per cent - the new Kaki Bukit ward, where they form 24 per cent, and Eunos, which is helmed by Zainul, with 20 per cent.

The contest is too close to call, said Zainul, who will likely be appointed speaker of Parliament if the PAP team wins.