

## **Bukit Batok by-election: What issues are in play? PAP: Murali's advantage is he's back on familiar ground**

**Walter Sim, Samuel Mak and Ng Keng Gene**  
*The Straits Times*, 1 May 2016

The People's Action Party (PAP) has stressed the long-term grassroots experience of its candidate, lawyer Murali Pillai, in Bukit Batok.

In cards he has distributed to residents, he writes: "It is my privilege to be with you in Bukit Batok, where I've served for 16 years."

National University of Singapore (NUS) political scientist Hussin Mutalib says this works in the PAP's favour because it would dispel any criticism that Mr Murali has been "parachuted" into the contest.

He was secretary of the Bukit Batok PAP branch for five years, and tended to residents when then MP Ong Chit Chung died in 2008.

Last Sunday, Dr Ong's widow accompanied Mr Murali on a walkabout.

Although he moved to Aljunied GRC in 2012 and stood as part of the five-man PAP team that narrowly lost to the Workers' Party (WP) last year, Mr Murali remains a familiar face in the area, has a good relationship with party activists and grassroots leaders, and can hit the ground running, should he be elected.

One measure of how he and the party are demonstrating those continuing and close ties is his election posters. Many show him with residents - a change from the formal candidate portraits that the PAP had previously used.

The party's approach of fielding someone who has connections to and is known on the ground contrasts with that in the 2013 by-election in Punggol East.

The PAP had then fielded a political newcomer - colorectal surgeon Koh Poh Koon. He was seen as having been parachuted into an area that was new to him.

That disadvantage showed when he lost the seat to the WP's candidate, Ms Lee Li Lian, who had contested in the 2011 general election and was making her second bid in Punggol East in the 2013 by-election.

Also central to the PAP's campaign this time has been its track record in town council management and the upgrading and other work that has been put in place.

National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser notes that the party has highlighted "its long, capable, reliable stewardship of the constituency and town council management and the specifics it has delivered to residents".

The prospect of continuity of programmes and projects is important to Bukit Batok residents such as student Cheng Ching Yi, 24, and housewife Jessie Toh, 59.

Mr Cheng, a Bukit Batok resident for 13 years, remarks that the estate has been clean and the facilities well maintained.

Bukit Batok was part of Jurong GRC from 2001 until it was carved out as a single-seat ward in last year's elections.

The estate came under the Jurong Town Council, and now continues to be under the reconstituted Jurong-Clementi Town Council.

That means Bukit Batok enjoys the benefits of economies of scale and the support of its large neighbour, plus the experience of its MPs, including Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who anchors Jurong GRC.

Mr Tharman, who is popular with residents, has stumped for Mr Murali on several occasions during the campaign, including at the Keming Primary School nomination centre last Wednesday, and a media conference where Mr Murali unveiled his campaign manifesto.

Says NUS political scientist Bilveer Singh: "Bukit Batok is a PAP stronghold benefiting from the osmosis of Jurong GRC and charismatic personality of Mr Tharman."

He believes Mr Murali's position as an "old hand" from Bukit Batok, and Mr Tharman's support, will give the PAP a lift.

Still, what will be watched is how effective such factors will be in enabling the PAP to break the hoodoo of recent by-elections. It lost in 2012 in Hougang and in 2013 in Punggol East to the WP.

Another unknown this time is whether, or to what extent, the race factor will have an effect.

PAP leaders have recognised that race is a factor in politics but are comfortable in their choice of Mr Murali as the candidate.

Mr Murali is the first Indian PAP candidate in recent elections to vie in a single-seat ward that has a higher proportion of Chinese residents than the national average.

He says Chinese-speaking seniors address him as "Ah Mu" and that the question of reaching out to Singaporeans who do not speak English "is not a new one for me".

It was a reference to the fact that he managed similar demographics in the Paya Lebar ward of Aljunied GRC in GE2015.

Institute of Policy Studies deputy director for research Gillian Koh says: "If the PAP retains the seat, it will suggest that it isn't always the case that it will lose a seat in a by-election and also that a minority candidate can do the job if he has a proven track record."