

Chasing that elusive PR Higher rejection rates means foreigners may seek home elsewhere

Teh Joo Lin and Melissa Kok
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Foreigners seeking permanent residency (PR) are bracing themselves for rejection as they react to the news that the number of people given PR status was halved last year.

Still, many of those seeking PR status interviewed by The Straits Times this week are adopting a wait-and-see attitude. Most of those rejected remain undeterred and plan to reapply.

However, there are some who are contemplating a move to countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

In the clearest sign that the Government is responding to concerns over too large an influx of foreigners, the PR intake fell to a five-year low last year.

Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng revealed this week that the country granted PR status to 29,265 foreigners last year, fewer than half of the 59,460 passes given out the year before.

In 2008, around 79,200 foreigners were granted PR, more than the 63,600 in 2007 and 57,300 in 2006. The drop follows the Government's move in 2009 to tighten the PR and citizenship criteria.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong set out the Government's thinking on the issue during his National Day Rally speech last year when he said it was time to slow the pace of accepting new citizens and PRs, as well as foreign workers.

'We can't continue going like this and increasing our population 100,000, 150,000 a year indefinitely and we should give Singaporeans time to adjust, and our society time to settle and integrate better the new arrivals. But we must not close ourselves up.'

The Straits Times understands that current applicants face more stringent eligibility criteria such as a higher income bar and residential requirements to ensure they can contribute to Singapore economically and integrate well.

An online tool on the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority's (ICA) website which applicants could previously use to gauge their chances of success was also removed last March as part of the changes.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said the sharp drop in PR intake marks a return to the trend of 1996 to 2004, when an average of 30,000 foreigners were granted PR annually.

He said: 'Maybe this is a sustainable rate, given limited resources such as land and infrastructure constraints, and the degree of psychological comfort with that rate among Singaporeans in the past.'

The Straits Times interviewed 15 foreigners trying for PR status.

Among those who had their applications rejected in the past year is Bangladeshi businessman Md Tofazzal Hossain, who has been turned down thrice since 2008, most recently a month ago.

The 45-year-old employment pass holder, who runs five businesses including restaurant and catering outfits and trading companies, says he hires 44 local workers and has pumped in more than \$1 million into his holdings here since 2006.

Pointing to his gold Rolex watch, he said: 'I like Singapore. I can wear this watch here. If I wear it in my home country, someone will chop off my hand.'

'But now I am thinking of going to do business in other countries.'

Another foreigner, a 39-year-old German marketing director, said he was shocked when the rejection letter came last September after a nine-month wait.

The master's degree holder, who declined to give his name for fear it might affect his chances, has been working here for about four years and is on a personalised employment pass, which allows non-Singaporeans to work here without being tied to a specific employer.

He married a Singaporean earlier this month. 'I want to settle down here... I want to contribute. I am not here to take jobs away from Singaporeans or exploit the system. But if it (rejection) happens a second time, too bad. I might go somewhere else,' he said.

Chinese national Wang Xiao Ying, who came here as a student in 2003 and is now working as a human resources consultant, said she will keep trying despite her rejection last October.

The 23-year-old advanced diploma holder said: 'I have lived here for so long. All my friends are here, including many locals. I hope the Government can loosen up the policy for those like me. But maybe the timing now isn't right.'

The Government does not disclose specific eligibility criteria to applicants.

On the ICA website, only the types of foreigners who qualify for PR are listed: they include S-Pass and employment pass holders, and the aged parents of Singapore citizens.

Immigrant associations, MPs and relocation specialists said they had observed that even young and well-educated foreigners have had difficulty making the cut for PR in the past year.

Mr Tony Du, president of Tian Fu Club an association for new Chinese immigrants mainly from Sichuan province, said more than 10 club members - all employment pass holders who are graduates from China and Singapore and mostly below 30 years old - had their PR applications rejected in the past two years.

MPs Charles Chong (Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC) and Halimah Yacob (Jurong GRC) made similar observations.

Previously, the people who came to him for help in PR applications were less qualified, said Mr Chong.

Madam Halimah added that while there is a wide spectrum of people who come to her with problems obtaining PR, 'the more educated ones have increased significantly enough for me to notice'.

She reckons that degree holders being rejected may mean that the criteria have become a lot more stringent, or that the degrees that the rejected applicants hold may not be that well recognised.

Mr Satish Bakdha, a manager at immigration specialist Rikvin, said that for much of last year, its clients faced a high rate of rejections - about three in 10 between March and September.

'Even good cases were rejected,' he said, referring to employment pass holders who were degree holders and well-heeled - earning more than \$120,000 a year.

Some foreigners are now looking at other options, says Aims Immigration, which specialises in relocation.

Compared to 2009, the firm received 20 per cent more queries last year from foreigners asking about relocation. They include current PRs who fear their re-entry permits will not be renewed.

Senior consultant Elsie Liow said: 'Now that the security is not there anymore, they are looking for alternative places to move to.'

Those who are staying put say they remain optimistic about getting PR - eventually.

Canadian Erica Denison, 33, and her husband are considering holding back their applications because of talk that the opening in the door will widen after the general election.

'I am kind of holding back a bit because we are wondering if we need to be strategic about when we apply,' said the client manager.

Some are speculating that applications submitted after the general election, which must be held by February next year, might be more successful.

Their reasoning? The Government would feel less pressure to bow to public sentiment against the influx of foreigners.

But Madam Halimah dismissed the link between PR applications and elections.

She said: 'I don't think it's got anything to do with before or after the elections. Policies cannot be changed on that basis. The issue is one of the relevance and value that they (foreigners) are bringing to the economy and society.'