

## **Govt scholarship holders a boost for the opposition?**

**First time so many have joined PAP rivals, but analysts say credentials play only a small part in winning votes**

***Tessa Wong & Jeremy Au Yong,***  
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Opposition parties appear to have struck fertile ground for new recruits: Government scholarship holders who have left the public service.

While none holding such credentials is known to have joined opposition parties in recent memory, the next election will be different, with four or more likely to be candidates.

Three former scholarship holders have already been unveiled: The National Solidarity Party's (NSP) Tony Tan, 41; and Hazel Poa, 41; and the Singapore People's Party's Benjamin Pwee, 43.

Ms Poa and Mr Pwee were recipients of the Overseas Merit scholarship and served in the elite Administrative Service. Mr Tan was awarded a Singapore Armed Forces Merit scholarship.

A fourth potential candidate emerged on Sunday: Defence Science and Technology Agency scholarship recipient Jimmy Lee, 35.

He is expected to join the team that veteran politician and Potong Pasir MP Chiam See Tong is putting together to contest in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC.

What lies behind the emergence of this recent crop of new opposition members?

Ms Poa believes that unlike in the past, there are more people now willing to question whether the People's Action Party (PAP) and its policies can create a better life for Singaporeans.

She cited wage stagnation and the controversial decision to allow casinos here as having given rise to why people are having doubts about the Government.

'There has been no lack of feedback to the ruling party on these issues, but no change has been forthcoming,' she said, adding that for people like her, joining the opposition was 'the only other option to bring about change'.

They may also see their involvement with the opposition as an extension of the service they were doing in the Government - except that now, some of them 'want to ensure that the Government is rigorous and accountable for its actions, and made to explain how these serve the public interest', said Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior fellow Gillian Koh.

Political observer and former NSP member Wong Wee Nam noted that all four were born after Singapore's independence, and are part of a generation which has a greater desire for plurality.

Unlike older generations of former civil servants who retired, joined the PAP and continued to serve, or went into the private sector, 'this new generation sees a need for change and wants to be different'.

But will their presence boost the opposition's chances at the polls?

Dr Koh pointed to a post-election IPS survey in 2006 which found that voters ranked credentials seventh, out of nine desirable traits in candidates.

The top three traits were honesty, efficiency and commitment.

While voters' interest in the opposition may be stoked, at the end of the day, they are looking for 'fair-minded, honest people with empathy and integrity'.

'I believe that is across the board - whether PAP or opposition,' Dr Koh said, adding that policy positions were also an important factor.

NSP president Sebastian Teo said that apart from academic credentials, the party also looks at other factors in accepting applications for membership. These include whether applicants are willing to submit to party decisions.

Citing himself as an example, he said that while his preference would be to reject a Non-Constituency MP post if offered, he would accept it if his party asked him to do so.

The scholarship holders themselves hope their involvement with the opposition represents a real change for politics here.

Mr Pwee said his contesting on an opposition ticket would signal to Singaporeans that there is another A-team out there: 'I am hoping people will come forward in any way - as volunteers or candidates - and together start to shape a more diversified representation.'

Dr Wong believes this will happen gradually. He said: 'It is a natural progression. They see that some have joined the opposition now, so more will be emboldened to join in future elections.'

But Dr Koh said it is not enough that they have stepped up to the plate. They will have to make a good impression too.

'Whether the opposition will get more of such people really depends also on how this group performs - how they present themselves as well as the outcome at the polls. People will watch them closely,' she said.