

More 'overseas Singaporeans' may emerge in GE **PAP and opposition parties aim to reach out to cosmopolitan voters**

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The next General Election could see several candidates who have spent a substantial amount of time living and working overseas.

They are likely to be fielded by both the People's Action Party (PAP) and opposition parties in what some observers say is a political strategy to reach out to young, globally mobile and cosmopolitan voters.

At last week's PAP conference, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told party cadres that senior leaders had 'made an enormous effort hunting for new candidates not just in Singapore but also among overseas Singaporeans'.

The PAP has yet to unveil its candidates for the next polls, but the opposition parties have at least three potential candidates from the Singapore diaspora.

The high-profile politician among them is Reform Party chief Kenneth Jeyaretnam, son of the late opposition stalwart J. B. Jeyaretnam.

The younger Mr Jeyaretnam, 51, had studied and worked abroad in various countries including Britain since 1984, but returned shortly before his father's death in 2008. The following year, he took over the reins of the party.

The other two are from the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP).

One of them is Dr James Gomez, 45, who had contested the 2006 General Election under the Workers' Party banner in Aljunied GRC.

During the election, he was the subject of a controversy over his non-submission of an application form for a minority candidate certificate.

He is head of public relations at Melbourne's Monash University, and shuttles between Australia and Singapore. He has told reporters he will quit his job and settle permanently in Singapore if he wins a parliamentary seat.

The other is Dr Vincent Wijesingha, 40, son of former Raffles Institution principal Eugene Wijesingha.

He returned to Singapore last year after 16 years in Britain where he was in the social work sector. He is now executive director of migrant workers' rights group Transient Workers Count Too.

On the PAP end, prominent activists who may be candidates include Dr Janil Puthuchery, a paediatrician who came to Singapore in 2001 with his Singaporean wife, after 15 years in Britain.

Born in Malaysia, the 38-year-old recalls that he and his wife had planned to stay in Singapore for only one year to spend time with family. But as they decided to have children, 'the question was, where did we want to bring them up?' He became a citizen in 2008.

His father Dominic Puthucheary was a founding member of the PAP, who later defected to form the opposition Barisan Sosialis with other leftists.

In February 1963, he was detained under the Internal Security Act and, 10 months later, was banned from entering Singapore. The ban was lifted in 1990.

Another face to watch is Ms Foo Mee Har, 44, who lived in China and Thailand from 2003 to last year, working for Standard Chartered Bank. She is based in Singapore as the bank's global head of premium banking.

As the world shrinks, Singaporeans are increasingly living abroad for longer periods after their studies; they are also more willing to take job postings overseas, and to marry foreigners.

At any one time, there are about 180,000 Singaporeans studying and living abroad.

Where overseas Singaporeans were once labelled 'quitters', as opposed to 'stayers', in terms popularised by former prime minister Goh Chok Tong, the prevailing discussion today is about how to maintain the ties that bind these far-flung citizens to their homeland.

In politics, the strategy is also about tailoring the choice of candidate to the changes party leaders perceive in the electorate as a whole.

In 2001, three candidates who were single women then - Ms Indranee Rajah, Ms Penny Low and Ms Irene Ng (who has since married) - were fielded, in what Ms Rajah says was a recognition of the growing number of single women in the country.

The move represented a generational sea change.

In the 1980s, a single woman was frowned upon. Marriage and motherhood were encouraged, especially among graduate women, who were offered financial incentives to marry and have children.

A similar evolution is occurring in the case of the overseas Singaporean, observers say.

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies argues that the label 'overseas Singaporean' is being used because PAP leaders believe there is a constituency of voters it will appeal to.

This is despite the fact that overseas experience is nothing new, with many top government figures having clocked time abroad whether for studies or work.

There was a time when PAP leaders worried that candidates who had spent a long time abroad would be perceived by voters as remote and unable to connect with the heartland 'ground'.

But now, Dr Koh said, 'there are many cosmopolitan Singaporeans who choose actively to be here despite opportunities elsewhere'.

She added: 'It would be nice for them to have someone they can identify with.'

But with the world as your oyster, could a life of grassroots events and house-to-house visits be enough?

PAP MPs, who are asked to refer potential candidates to party headquarters, say it is an uphill task to appeal to overseas Singaporeans used to travelling for business to settle down to public life.

But without this prior commitment, said MP Baey Yam Keng, the conversation between party and potential candidate will stop. 'It's important that the person can say to voters, 'Yes I've been overseas for the last few years, but now I'm here to stay'.'