

PAP teams swing into action, ready for election

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When the Writ of Election was issued yesterday afternoon, signalling that Singapore would go to the polls in 17 days, People's Action Party (PAP) branches across the island swung into election mode.

Out of the drawer came their battle plans as they shrugged off the months-long standby because of the global pandemic.

Covid-19 had thrown a spanner in the works as social distancing measures put the brakes on preparations.

In the early months of this year, the PAP had revved up its election machinery after the Government announced the new electoral boundaries in March.

Potential candidates began to be more visible on the ground, shadowing incumbent MPs, as the party started to position its people for the electoral battle.

But everything was put on hold when infection numbers spiked in the foreign workers' dormitories and the country entered an eight-week circuit breaker shutdown to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

Former PAP MP Inderjit Singh said the party had been ready for a contest as early as April or last month.

Now, the PAP branches in each constituency are swiftly moving into high gear again for the short but intense electioneering.

"The manifestos are probably all ready, so are the posters and the nine-day campaign plan. Now, it is about executing the plan," Mr Singh said.

With the writ issued and Singapore in phase two of its economic reopening, activists say they are raring to go again.

"We've been walking the ground since the last GE (general election) ended (in September 2015), so residents already know and recognise us. But of course, we cannot take things for granted and slow down. The ground campaign may not be as demanding but we will still have to go house to house," said an activist.

This time, limits on physical campaigning means candidates will be reaching out more actively to voters in cyberspace.

For instance, National Development Minister Lawrence Wong and his Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC team are launching a series of live chats with residents on Facebook today.

With an economic recession looming and rising job losses on the horizon, party activists and analysts said they are expecting a "flight to safety" by voters, who will likely turn to PAP, with its experience, to steer Singapore through the storm.

Said Mr Singh: "The ground is not sweet, it is worried about the future, and because people are worried, they will not vote recklessly."

Other activists said their sense of the ground sentiment is that people are generally satisfied with the fiscal support - four Budgets amounting to almost \$93 billion - that the Government has marshalled to fight Covid-19, support businesses and keep Singaporeans employed.

"There might be a lot of migrant workers infected but people can see that not many Singaporeans have been stricken by the bug. At the same time, they can see all the schemes that are available to help them," noted another activist.

In the face of the public health and economic crisis, the PAP activists interviewed believe their party could match its result in the 2015 General Election.

That year, with the election held amid the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence and six months after founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew died, the PAP won with almost 70 per cent of the popular vote.

Previous crisis elections had yielded similarly high vote shares. For instance, in the 2001 GE that was held soon after the Sept 11 terror attacks, the PAP got 75.3 per cent of the popular vote.

Institute of Policy Studies deputy director for research Gillian Koh noted that the party leaders in Government had used the series of six ministerial broadcasts this month to emphasise to voters that they have the wherewithal to shepherd not just Singapore's short-term recovery, but also its longer-term social and economic progress.

"The PAP, even with its new recruits, will try to emphasise it has a team that has the smarts, the experience and commitment to lead the country out (of the crisis) and generate sustained progress for the future," said Dr Koh.

She pointed out that many incumbent MPs and potential candidates had also kept busy during the circuit breaker period, building their online presence and gearing up for the battle in cyberspace.

In a Facebook post yesterday, Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing said the Government will continue to put the interests of Singaporeans "front and centre".

"This will be a very different general election. We are holding one in exceedingly difficult circumstances, at a time when Singapore and Singaporeans are facing the most serious health and economic challenges of this generation," he said.

This election, however, has another layer of importance for the ruling party: leadership transition.

The fourth-generation leadership is set to take over in the next term of government, as fresh blood is being brought in to take the place of senior ministers retiring from politics.

Among those expected to step aside are political veterans such as Mr Khaw Boon Wan from Sembawang GRC; Mr Lim Hng Kiang from West Coast GRC; Mr Lim Swee Say from East Coast GRC; and Dr Yaacob Ibrahim from Jalan Besar GRC.

But with Covid-19, the party has not had the same runway to officially introduce its new candidates - traditionally done at press conferences leading up to the issuance of the Writ of Election.

Still, activists said plans are afoot to do so in the next few days.

Among the prospective candidates are top public servants who have stepped down from their posts recently, signalling they could enter politics in the coming polls. Some of them include:

- Former Infocomm Media Development Authority chief executive Tan Kiat How, 43, who is tipped to be fielded in East Coast GRC, where two outgoing MPs - Mr Lim Swee Say and Mr Lee Yi Shyan - are expected to leave.
- Former air force brigadier-general Gan Siow Huang, 45, who is now deputy CEO of the National Trades Union Congress' Employment and Employability Institute, and is expected to be fielded in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC.
- Former brigadier-general Desmond Tan, 49, who left his post as People's Association chief executive earlier this month, and could be part of the PAP's team in Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC.
- Former group chief of the Silver Generation Office under the Agency for Integrated Care Yip Hon Weng, 43, who could be fielded in the new Yio Chu Kang single seat.

New faces from the private sector have also featured prominently in virtual discussions with residents and grassroots leaders in the past few months. They include:

- Changi Airport Group vice-president Poh Li San, 45, who has been active in Sembawang GRC.
- Lawyer Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim, 39, who is expected to be fielded in Chua Chu Kang GRC.
- Polytechnic senior lecturer Wan Rizal Wan Zakariah, 41, who appeared on a webinar with Manpower Minister Josephine Teo and Ms Denise Phua, both of whom are expected to be on the PAP's Jalan Besar GRC slate.
- DBS Bank managing director and head of group audit Derrick Goh, 51, who has been spotted with Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam in Nee Soon GRC.

Activists said that what remains is to make sure candidates' forms are in order, and orders are placed for last-minute campaign materials, including calling cards with candidates' pictures, and Covid-19 essentials such as bottles of hand sanitiser with the party's logo on them.

"I think they are confident; the PAP will do very well," said Mr Singh.