

## **Singapore GE2020: Ruling PAP confident of good showing in coming contest**

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The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) is going into the next election quietly confident of a good showing.

A desire for political stability amid the economic headwinds and a sense among voters that its leaders in government have done their utmost to steady the ship, have buoyed PAP activists' beliefs that the party could match its performance in the 2015 General Election, when it won with almost 70 per cent of the popular vote.

So when the Writ of Election was issued on Tuesday (June 23) afternoon, signalling that Singapore would go to the polls in 18 days, 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 May this year.

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," he 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 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 on cyberspace. For instance, National Development Minister Lawrence

Wong and his Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC team are launching live chats with residents on Wednesday (June 24)

With an economic recession looming and rising job losses in the horizon, party activists and analysts say they are expecting a "flight to safety" from 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 say their sense of ground sentiment is that people are generally satisfied with the fiscal support - four Budgets amounting to almost \$93 billion - 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 foresee their party matching its result in the 2015 GE.

Held amid the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence and six months after founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew died, the PAP won in 2015 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 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.

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

The 4G 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 Prof 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 say plans are afoot to do so in the few days ahead.

Among the prospectives 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 incumbent MPs - Mr Lim Swee Say and Mr Li 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' (NTUC) 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.

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, in Sembawang GRC; 39-year-old lawyer Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim in Chua Chu Kang GRC; and polytechnic senior lecturer Wan Rizal Wan Zakariah, 41.

Dr Wan Rizal appeared last Saturday (June 20) 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.

Activists say 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 e-rally timings as well as Covid-19 essentials, like bottles of hand sanitizer with the party's logo on it.

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