

Singapore GE2020: SDP leaders fielded in single seats in reshuffle

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The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) placed its top two leaders in single-member constituencies yesterday, breaking away from the conventional practice of having them lead group representation constituencies.

While the SDP is contesting in the same five constituencies that it did in 2015 and fielding many of the same candidates, the party surprised many by reshuffling the pack yesterday.

The SDP's chairman, Professor Paul Tambyah, who was expected to lead the party's GRC charge in Holland-Bukit Timah, filed his nomination papers for Bukit Panjang SMC instead.

The change appeared to cause a cascade of other moves: The party's expected candidate for Bukit Panjang SMC, Mr Khung Wai Yeen, 37, headed to Marsiling-Yew-Tee GRC; Dr James Gomez, 55, who had been seen campaigning in Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC, moved to Holland-Bukit Timah GRC; and Mr Tan Jee Say, 66, who asked to join the party on Monday, ended up leading the Holland-Bukit Timah GRC team.

Party chief Chee Soon Juan, who will be contesting in Bukit Batok SMC, said the changes were done to maximise the chances of getting SDP candidates into Parliament.

Dr Chee, 57, said at a virtual media conference from the SDP's headquarters that the party had deliberately made its candidates campaign in different areas: "As far as our strategy is concerned, we get our candidates to walk in all the different constituencies... We constantly work as a team. And this is in anticipation of the fact that we're at the mercy of the PAP (People's Action Party), as far as redrawing of boundaries is concerned."

Prof Tambyah, 55, who faces PAP's Mr Liang Eng Hwa in Bukit Panjang SMC, said the SDP needed "to find the best candidate for the best location for the best outcome for the people".

On Saturday, Prof Tambyah, who was announced as the 2022 president-elect for the International Society of Infectious Diseases, was spotted at a Bukit Panjang walkabout with Mr Khung, who had contested the seat in 2015.

Media expert Natalie Pang said Prof Tambyah's decision to contest a single seat was to capitalise on his personal appeal.

"To me, it's quite clear it was a tactical move as he is a well-known person who has 'street cred' in the medical field.

"In the context of this pandemic election, having street credibility and being an expert in infectious diseases will give him very good standing with voters."

But she said Dr Chee and Prof Tambyah will likely campaign differently.

Dr Chee, who had previously contested the 2016 by-election in Bukit Batok SMC against the PAP's Mr Murali Pillai, has focused on municipal issues in Bukit Batok.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director (research) at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that with the SDP's best-known politicians standing in single-member constituencies, the party will be riding on its brand in the GRCs but on the personal pull of the key leaders in the SMCs.

She told The Straits Times: "I think that part of the reason for the switch is that the re-entry of Tan Jee Say into the party made it possible.

"Mr Tan first contested in Holland-Bukit Timah GRC in 2011 and perhaps he was willing to helm the team there. Dr James Gomez has also returned and is able to be the minority candidate there. This then released, in a manner of speaking, Prof Tambyah to stand on his own."

Political analyst Felix Tan pointed out that Dr Chee and Prof Tambyah were teammates in the 2015 General Election when the SDP contested in the Holland-Bukit Timah GRC, and probably split up to increase their chances of getting into Parliament.

"They both have very strong supporters individually. By splitting, they might think that even if they lose, they won't lose too badly, and can go (into Parliament) by the NCMP route," he said.