

## **State of the slates; PAP firming up its line-up?**

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AS THE talk of an impending next General Election (GE) heats up, a flurry of activity has been taking place among potential People's Action Party (PAP) candidates on the ground.

Hopefuls are going through final-round interviews with the senior party leadership, while those who have already passed this hurdle are being slotted around the island where existing MPs are set to step down.

For this GE, which must be called by January 2017, the PAP leadership has taken the strategy of exposing its hopefuls early and openly.

Insight has encountered over 20 on the ground understudying MPs in community work, some having been in place since as early as 2012. A few were formally named by the ministers in the group representation constituencies (GRCs) they have been deployed to.

Last April, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen introduced corporate chief Chong Kee Hiong and economist Saktiandi Supaat at a community event to reporters, noting that they were among potential candidates already active on the ground.

Earlier this year, the two were appointed members of the Bishan-Toa Payoh Town Council.

Other potential candidates on the ground have taken up official positions as grassroots leaders or members of party branch executive committees.

The ruling party has long faced charges - not just from opponents but also from its own rank-and-file activists - that some candidates are "parachuted" into branches just before elections. They arrive unused to the rigours of heartland campaigning, untrained in the art of connecting with ordinary folk, and ill-prepared for the media spotlight.

The apotheosis seemingly came in the 2013 Punggol East by-election, when the PAP fielded colorectal surgeon Koh Poh Koon, who had joined the party and been introduced to branch activists and residents mere weeks before the polls. He garnered 43.7 per cent of the vote, losing to Workers' Party (WP) candidate Lee Li Lian.

That prompted a rethink.

In the past, the PAP kept the identities of its candidates under wraps until just before its official media introductions just before the campaign.

This was to avoid thrusting the hopefuls into the public spotlight until they were officially confirmed as candidates, but also to avoid alarming incumbent MPs who may have preferred not to make way for new blood.

But the party leadership seems to have judged that these costs are outweighed by the need to train candidates who are effective and comfortable on the ground.

"The Prime Minister said (in 2013) that even if he felt his candidate was the most suitable one, time is needed for people to warm up to him," says Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow **Gillian Koh**.

"The strategy of giving more time for would-be candidates to work the ground not only allows the voters to get to know the person, but for the party to see how the ground is responding. It is a necessary strategy for managing risk for the party."

Veteran MP Charles Chong, who helms the Joo Chiat single-seat constituency, tells Insight that "it is the candidate, and not the party, that counts today".

"If you put a candidate in a constituency at the last minute, voters will feel that they have been taken for granted."

But for a select and closely watched group of candidates - those with ministerial potential - a long lead-in time is often not possible.

Those in the civil service's elite administrative service cannot be involved in politics. They must resign from the public service before entering politics, often remaining jobless for a few months through the campaign and polling period, and then are made office holders soon afterwards.

In 2011, this was the path taken by Minister for Education Heng Swee Keat, Minister for Social and Family Development Tan Chuan-Jin, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong, and labour chief Chan Chun Sing.

For the coming GE, watchers expect to see the same number or more of these "big gun" candidates fielded, given Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's declaration last month that the coming polls are "about leadership renewal".

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan also notes that the PAP must now contend with electoral vagaries upsetting its leadership-renewal plans - as when former top civil servant Ong Ye Kung, touted as being of ministerial calibre, failed to win a seat in Parliament after the PAP's Aljunied slate lost their seats to the WP in 2011.

"A buffer may have to be placed in terms of numbers (of ministerial-calibre candidates)," he says. "The pace of leadership succession has taken on a greater urgency, so we can expect the renewal process to be even more rigorous this time."

Talk is that those from the top government ranks who may take the plunge include Chief of Defence Force Ng Chee Meng, 47, Chief of Navy Lai Chung Han, 42, Chief Guards Officer Melvyn Ong, 40, and second permanent secretary of the Ministry of Trade and Industry Chee Hong Tat, 42, who was formerly principal private secretary (PPS) to then Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

Another former PPS to Mr Lee, current Changi Airport Group (CAG) chief executive Lee Seow Hiang, 45, may also decide to take up the call to join the Government.

His entry into politics, after seven years at the helm of a corporatised CAG, will help defuse charges that the PAP's slate of new leaders lacks private-sector experience.

## **The final countdown?**

OF THE new faces already on the ground, several have recently been moved around constituencies, a development that suggests that the party is entering its final stages of deployment.

One such likely candidate is Ms Cheng Li Hui, 38, deputy chief executive of engineering, process and construction services company Hai Leck Holdings.

She had earlier understudied Sembawang GRC MPs Ellen Lee and Vikram Nair, before being moved to Tampines East - a ward in Tampines GRC - in February, where the current MP is former national development minister Mah Bow Tan, 66. He left Cabinet after the 2011 GE.

Ms Cheng has been made vice-chairman of the ward's Citizens' Consultative Committee, the apex of grassroots organisations.

In turn, unionist Desmond Choo - who the party fielded in WP-held Hougang single-member constituency in 2011 and the 2012 by-election - was moved from Tampines East to adjacent Tampines Changkat in February. The current MP in Tampines Changkat is Ms Irene Ng, 51, who is completing her third term.

Backbench MPs do not usually stay longer than three or four terms.

Over in Ang Mo Kio GRC, food-supply company Foodtraco Supplies executive director Henry Kwek joined veteran MP Inderjit Singh in Kebun Baru several months ago.

The 39-year-old was previously branch secretary at Law and Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam's Chong Pang ward, a launching pad for many a hopeful.

Mr Singh, 55, has been an MP for four terms.

Animal-rights activist Louis Ng, 37, was moved at the start of the year to single-seat Joo Chiat, under six-term MP Charles Chong. This followed Mr Ng's previous stints at Chong Pang and then Kembangan-Chai Chee in Marine Parade GRC.

Meanwhile, former Aljunied GRC candidate Ong Ye Kung has been moved into the relatively safe team of National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan in Sembawang GRC.

He is now understudying Senior Parliamentary Secretary Hawazi Daipi in Marsiling ward. Mr Hawazi is serving his fourth term.

Over in the west, oncologist Tan Wu Meng, 40, has been in three-term MP Arthur Fong's Clementi ward for the past several months, after a previous stint at Jalan Besar before the 2011 GE.

## **Electoral boundaries**

THESE deployments are by no means the final word on the PAP's line-up, as they also act as a testing ground that some may still fail to traverse.

And even after the slate is confirmed, candidate changes are still possible at the last minute.

In 2011, PAP candidate Steve Tan abruptly pulled out on the morning of Nomination Day, setting off a scramble that saw then Tanjong Pagar GRC MP Baey Yam Keng moved into his spot in Tampines and orthopaedic surgeon Chia Shi-Lu activated from the PAP's reserve list to be fielded in Mr Baey's place.

Also, electoral boundaries for the coming GE have not yet been released.

The Electoral Boundaries Review Committee, typically made up of five civil servants chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, might split or diminish GRCs, and absorb or create single seats.

Demographic changes figure largely in how boundaries will morph. So some wards are already preparing for what they see as likely transfigurations.

Sengkang West single-seat constituency, for example, has seen its population nearly double since the 2011 GE, says its MP, Dr Lam Pin Min.

This makes it likely that parts of it will be re-drawn and combined with nearby areas as either another single seat or as a ward in a GRC.

So former TV personality Darryl David, 45, has been helping in Dr Lam's ward since last June, while also understudying veteran Yeo Guat Kwang in the nearby Ang Mo Kio-Hougang ward, which is part of Ang Mo Kio GRC.

Residents in Sengkang West are of a young-family profile, while those over in Ang Mo Kio-Hougang are older, says Dr Lam. Similarly, "Darryl and I are of similar age, (while) Mr Yeo is a veteran with many years of experience. This gives Darryl a different sort of exposure," he adds.

### **Adding colour**

MR DAVID'S emergence as a potential candidate, together with those of animal-rights activist Louis Ng and teenage rebel-turned-criminal lawyer Josephus Tan, 36, makes this one of the more colourful groups in recent PAP history.

In the potential line-up are also several private-sector business executives, a group that the ruling party has had more trouble attracting than the lawyers, doctors and public-sector types.

Observers see a concerted effort to form a slate that responds to critics who say that the PAP fields only a certain profile of high-credentialed technocrats.

Some of its most popular current backbenchers, like disabled-rights activist Denise Phua (Moulmein-Kallang GRC) and staunch anti-poverty advocate Lily Neo (Tanjong Pagar GRC), depart from this profile and also have the reputation for fiercely challenging government policy.

"Pluralism and diversity within the PAP can help the party come across to the electorate as one that is less uniform, less conformist, more catholic, and a party that straddles the broad middle ground," notes Associate Professor Tan.

"Candidates with the technocratic abilities are still the priority, but there is nonetheless the accent on the atypical candidates this time," he adds.

Another noticeable feature of the potential line-up thus far is that none are younger than 36. This is perhaps by design, given the backlash that Marine Parade GRC MP Tin Pei Ling received in 2011, when she was fielded at the age of 27 and criticised for being too inexperienced to enter Parliament.

### **Challenging demands**

WHETHER a big-gun candidate who may be the country's next prime minister, or an earnest potential backbencher at the edge of the spotlight, the hopefuls are courting voters who today expect more of their representatives than ever.

The most intense examination will be of the ministerial-calibre candidates, whose stellar credentials and public-service records are no longer seen as the last word.

Notes IPS' **Gillian Koh**: "All ministerial-calibre candidates would have proven their mettle, leadership abilities and whether they can inspire people to follow and work with them.

"While these may still define the traits of a political leader for a good many Singaporeans, others want to be convinced that they do not need the command-and-control authority structure of their previous jobs to operate effectively, that they can empathise with the common man, solve complex social puzzles, and be a voice for them."