

Will winds of change sweep PAP? Analysts split on impact of George Yeo's call to transform party

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Foreign Minister George Yeo's call on Thursday for a 'transformed PAP' was unprecedented in its candour, political watchers said yesterday.

While it added to the list of surprising statements from senior People's Action Party (PAP) leaders that included apologies and acknowledgments of mis-steps, Mr Yeo's trumped them all.

It is the first time in recent years, observers recall, that a senior party cadre has openly reflected on the shortcomings of the party.

But they were split on how much momentum his call for change will carry through to a post-election government - especially if Mr Yeo and his Aljunied GRC team members lose to the Workers' Party (WP) challengers.

Mr Yeo had told *The Straits Times* on Thursday that 'regardless of the outcome (of the election), I see the party taking a very hard look at itself and the way it does things'.

He singled out a failure to listen to what people have to say: 'When there's a strong reaction (from the public), don't be too quick to defend, to explain or to justify. Acknowledge the grievance first.'

He also emphasised that the Government will have to take into account the 'unease' over the 'pace of change' here.

'If the infrastructure is not ready, let's get it ready first, so that people don't feel the congestion, that they are being displaced,' Mr Yeo said.

While the development is a clear indicator that the PAP has its own revolutionaries ready to change the party from within, observers yesterday were unsure if the zest for change is shared internally and across the board - especially among those having easier electoral contests.

'Look at the context,' said a former veteran PAP MP who did not want to be identified. 'He is fighting for his life in Aljunied GRC.'

Other colleagues have largely been silent on the issue. Although most acknowledged the need for the Government to communicate better with the people, none went as far as Mr Yeo did in advocating a 'transformed' PAP.

Nanyang Technological University associate professor Cherian George said the issue would have to be debated among the PAP leadership.

As such discussions are unlikely to be publicised, Singaporeans would need to wait a while to see substantive changes.

'But in the short term, if George Yeo secures Aljunied, one clear sign that the PM is fully behind Mr Yeo's promise would be if he's appointed as a deputy prime minister,' he said.

But should the nail-biter in Aljunied GRC fall the way of the team led by WP chief Low Thia Kiang, some believe it might, ironically, strengthen Mr Yeo's mission.

'If the results are not favourable for the PAP, then (the party) will change because it will have no other choice,' said opposition veteran and political watcher Wong Wee Nam, who is close to the leaders of the Singapore Democratic Party.

The agenda for change will stall if the PAP does well, or gets a better-than-expected vote share after all the ballots are counted tonight, he explained.

'Party leaders will then say, 'Why do we have to change? We are doing so well. It shows that our system works.'

But Institute of Policy Studies senior fellow Gillian Koh argued that the inverse might be true: 'If they win (in Aljunied), it could be read as the result of being more explicit about the need to change.'

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's apology would then be 'no skin off his nose', as it could be seen as having convinced the electorate that the PAP is capable of changing on its own, without an opposition.

A handsome mandate would also make the decisive case for PM Lee's gentler leadership style, and win support from veteran ministers for an agenda of internal change, she said.

Should the winds of change blow hard through the PAP, what differences should Singaporeans expect?

Mr Wong suggested measures like lifting the party whip during the vote on more controversial policies, and free elections within the PAP in their own leadership selection.

Young PAP (YP) activist Shaikh Ismail said the party had to do more in cyberspace than establish new media platforms to disseminate its message.

'We need to close the loop, to listen and take into consideration the views expressed elsewhere online,' he said.

One suggestion he says YP activists are mulling over is online Meet-the-People sessions - akin to the way PM Lee had an hour-long Facebook webchat with netizens on Wednesday.

'Many of the commenters were asking, is this going to be only a one-time thing for elections,' he added. 'It shows the hunger they have to reach out, and be reached.'

Dr Koh was uncertain about the extent of changes there would be to fundamental parts of the political system.

But what she believes will change is the way the PAP engages the public before enacting policies, modifies them to acknowledge strong public disquiet, and accounts for mistakes and mishaps if any occur.

'In the extreme cases, those in charge might even be asked to leave their positions, just like in the private sector,' she said.