

Workers' Party to elect new exec council on Sunday

Rachel Au-Yong, Chong Zi Liang

The Straits Times, 27 May 2016

Leaders expected to retain posts; new faces will give clues to leadership succession plans

The Workers' Party (WP) is holding its party conference on Sunday to elect a new team to its top decision-making body in a move to pave the way for leadership succession.

Last month, the party took the unusual step of appointing 28 new cadres - party members with voting rights to elect the Central Executive Council (CEC). It brings the total number of cadres to about 130, party sources told The Straits Times.

New cadres are typically not inducted in such large numbers. In the previous round of cadre admissions two years ago, fewer than 10 were added.

The latest group of 28 include candidates in last year's general election as well as WP grassroots activists. Most support WP secretary-general Low Thia Khiang's focus on leadership renewal.

They include the party's candidates in Marine Parade GRC at the last general election Dylan Ng, 40, and Firuz Khan, 49, as well as Nee Soon GRC candidates Cheryl Loh, 32, and Ron Tan, 31.

Party insiders said admitting them as cadres gives Mr Low the assurance that those earmarked for leadership positions can be elected into the CEC. He will also have a firmer hand in deciding the timetable for succession, they added.

The new cadres also form a significant voting bloc that will help avoid a repeat of the fierce contest at the WP conference in July 2014, when more than 20 people vied for 12 available spots. Four CEC members that Mr Low deemed important were voted out of the CEC by a faction of cadres who were not happy with the direction of the party.

On Sunday, Mr Low, 59, and party chairman Sylvia Lim, 51, are expected to retain their positions unopposed, as they have the confidence of a majority of the CEC and most cadres. Neither Mr Low nor Ms Lim have been challenged since they assumed their positions in 2001 and 2003 respectively.

Succession planning is a top priority for Mr Low, who made leadership renewal in the WP a key message at last year's general election.

He had identified the WP's candidates in East Coast GRC and Fengshan as future leaders of the party, and all eyes will be on signs of the next secretary-general or chairman emerging among them.

In particular, Non-Constituency MP (NCMP) Daniel Goh, 42, part of the WP's East Coast team, has been helping at Mr Low's Meet-the-People Sessions, while NCMP Dennis Tan, 45, who stood in the Fengshan single seat, has been assisting Mr Low in his administrative duties.

Analysts said it is worth watching CEC moves for indicators of who might be next in line to lead the party. Institute of Policy Studies deputy director Gillian Koh said: "As the leading opposition party, some attention will be given to whether there will be new faces in its governing committee and if there are indications of leadership succession beyond just positions that Mr Low and Ms Lim hold."

National University of Singapore political science academic Bilveer Singh said the WP CEC already includes "young faces that will matter in the near future", such as Mr Goh, Mr Tan and NCMP Leon Perera, 45.

"The next GE is still four years away and the WP is not in a hurry to put all the key people in place, even though the top personalities are discernible," he said.

"Low and Sylvia are still relatively young and capable. What is most important is the WP clearly signalling that it is not a personality-based party as some opposition parties appear to be," he added.

"Most importantly, as Singaporeans are very particular about talented individuals, the WP also wants to signal that it has not just new faces but those who are highly talented."