

Analysts divided on whether Lui's exit would help PAP at GE

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Political analysts yesterday were surprised not just by the announcement of Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew's departure but also its timing, given that the polls could be just weeks away.

Given the People's Action Party's reputation for meticulous planning and leaving few things to chance, the move to make public Mr Lui's decision to step down before the polls must have been carefully thought through, the analysts added. They were, however, divided on whether it would benefit the ruling party at the polls.

While Mr Lui's departure could be perceived as the Government being accountable for transport problems, it could also be seen as an individual unfairly carrying the can for what should be a collective responsibility, they said.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan noted that transport — which was a hot topic in the 2011 General Election (GE) — could again be a lightning rod in the coming elections. Mr Lui's stepping down before the polls would “uncomplicate matters”, he said. “What troubles me is whether a precedent has been set on Ministers taking personal responsibility notwithstanding the principle of the Cabinet's collective responsibility. I find it rather odd and worrying that the Transport Minister seems to have taken the rap personally. I don't think anyone can say that he has not been equal to the task ... It's not for want of trying (by Mr Lui),” he said.

National University of Singapore political scientist Bilveer Singh said he was rather taken aback by the move. “We do not stand down ministers before a GE,” he said, also noting that for the PAP, “it is not a question of whether a member ... decides where and when to contest (elections). It is decided by a party machinery”.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said Mr Lui has had “a difficult run”, given that he had inherited some of the problems plaguing public transportation — a similar situation faced by his predecessor Mr Raymond Lim.

Mr Lim, who served one term as Transport Minister, stepped down from the Cabinet after the 2011 GE. He remains a Member of Parliament, but is also likely to retire from politics before the coming GE.

Dr Koh said: “In terms of policy, there has been no effort spared to address the issues at the Ministry and government level, and at the operational level, transport companies have also come under very strict scrutiny by the Land Transport Authority. Politically though, voters might recognise that a price has been paid (with Mr Lui stepping down).”

Mr Lui's engineering background has been seen by some as an advantage in his role. As to who among the present crop of office holders — or potential new faces — may take over the role, Dr Koh said: “The reforms are there to be implemented, but at this stage it will still have to be someone with a stout heart to take up such a challenging portfolio (that) affects millions of Singaporeans every day.”

Assoc Prof Tan added: "What is really needed now is a Minister who is prepared to take on a portfolio which is now regarded very much as a poisoned chalice. It could be a career-limiting move. Hopefully there will be someone who is willing and bold enough to step up to the challenge."