

Bukit Batok by-election to be held on May 7

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The Bukit Batok by-election will be held on May 7, about two months after the ward's former Member of Parliament David Ong stepped down because of an alleged extramarital affair.

The Writ of Election, which sets the election process in motion, was issued yesterday and nomination of candidates will take place on Wednesday next week at Keming Primary School in the single-member constituency (SMC).

Should there be a contest, Bukit Batok residents will cast their votes after a nine-day campaign and one cooling-off day.

Pending last-minute surprises, the by-election is set to be a straight fight between the People's Action Party's (PAP) Murali Pillai, 48, and the Singapore Democratic Party's (SDP) Chee Soon Juan, 53, both of whom have already been actively working the ground for the past weeks.

The Writ was issued by President Tony Tan on the advice of Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, who is Acting Prime Minister while Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong is on an official visit to the Middle East.

In a Facebook post yesterday, Mr Lee said: "Now that the Budget is out of the way, we are calling this by-election to enable residents of Bukit Batok to have their own MP as we work together to improve Singaporeans' lives."

Adding that he had spoken to Mr Teo, Mr Lee said: "Partnership between Government and citizens is key to our success. I hope Bukit Batok residents will elect the candidate who will be concerned for their welfare, represent them ably in Parliament, and make Bukit Batok the best home for them."

Less than a hour after the writ was issued yesterday afternoon, Mr Murali, a lawyer, and PAP activists were making their rounds in Bukit Batok. Earlier in the day, Dr Chee was also in the constituency greeting residents.

Speaking to reporters during his walkabout, Mr Murali said he would unveil his plans for Bukit Batok before Nomination Day, and they would address the living environment in what is a mature estate with a number of senior citizens, as well as needy families.

Asked what portion of the constituency he had reached out to so far, Mr Murali said he did not have the percentage of blocks he had covered but would try to have "good conversations" with residents — understanding their concerns, the size of their families and how they are taking care of their elderly, for instance.

Before contesting in the Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC) in last September's General Election (GE), Mr Murali was the Branch Secretary of PAP Bukit Batok under the late Dr Ong Chit Chung, who was MP for the Bukit Batok ward under Jurong GRC from 2001 until his death in 2008.

The Bukit Batok ward was carved out of Jurong GRC in the 2015 GE. Its former MP, Mr David Ong, resigned on March 12 over an alleged extramarital relationship with a grassroots

volunteer. He had won 73.02 per cent of the vote, defeating the SDP's Sadasivam Veriyah (26.4 per cent) and independent candidate Samir Salim Neji (0.6 per cent)

Calling for volunteers yesterday evening on Facebook, Dr Chee wrote: "We've got a mountain to climb and we will climb it. I'm looking forward to it. But we need your help. Democracy needs your help, TeamSDP needs your help, I need your help ... Now is the time to step up and make our voices heard."

This by-election will be a re-match of PAP versus the Opposition, but without the SG50 factor "automatically working in favour of the PAP", said political analyst Alan Chong of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies. Topics raised during the hustings could span from national concerns — including the survival of small and medium firms, whether government policies are doing enough, cost of living, safety and reliability of the MRT system — to municipal issues in Bukit Batok, he said.

In the 2015 GE, Dr Chee contested his first elections in 14 years after he was discharged as a bankrupt. He led the SDP team in Holland-Bukit Timah GRC that garnered 33.4 per cent of the vote. In the by-election, Dr Chee is likely to focus on the need for more opposition voices in Parliament and try convincing voters that this will not be at the expense of town council management, said Institute of Policy Studies deputy director (research) Gillian Koh. He could also focus on the support low- and middle-income Singaporeans need in a period of economic uncertainty and "therefore, what more the Government must do to serve the people better", she said.

Mr Murali is likely to demonstrate his close understanding of the Bukit Batok community and his track record of serving 16 years in the grassroots there, said Dr Koh. He could highlight the PAP government's policies that support the type of voters in Bukit Batok as well as development plans — in terms of infrastructure and jobs — that the governing party has in store, she said.

Also interesting to watch will be the extent to which PAP heavyweights who helm neighbouring constituencies — such as Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu — will be present to stump for Mr Murali, she said.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan noted that individual qualities of each candidate, such as their values and how well they engage with residents, will take on greater prominence in an SMC by-election.

"PAP of course wants to retain the seat and Dr Chee knows that this is as good an opportunity to make it to Parliament as it could get. We are looking at the by-election advantage, the seat vacated in not-so-good circumstances for the ruling party, and the waning of the SG50 dividend as well as the Lee Kuan Yew factor," said Associate Professor Tan. He was referring to voters potentially being more willing to cast ballots for an opposition candidate in a by-election, as the ruling party is in no danger of losing power, and the outpouring of solidarity last year in the wake of the founding Prime Minister's death.