

New advisers for Aljunied, Hougang wards

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After serving as grassroots advisers in constituencies where they lost during the General Election in 2011, Mr Ong Ye Kung and Mr Desmond Choo are leaving their positions in the opposition-held wards of Aljunied GRC and Hougang.

The People's Association (PA) announced yesterday that Mr Choo had been appointed second adviser to Tampines Grassroots Organisations (GROs) for Tampines East. Mr Ong, who has been volunteering in Sembawang GRC, relinquished his post as adviser for Kaki Bukit in Aljunied.

Replacing them are veteran grassroots leaders Goh Chee Koh, 69, and Dr Kee Wei Heong, 64. Mr Goh, the honorary chairman of Punggol Central Citizens' Consultative Committee (CCC), is now adviser to Hougang GROs, while Dr Kee, chairman of Bukit Gombak CCC, takes over from Mr Ong.

The changes mean the positions of adviser to GROs at the two Workers' Party-held constituencies — typically held by People's Action Party (PAP) Members of Parliament or potential PAP candidates — are now almost all filled by veteran grassroots leaders.

Apart from Dr Kee, advisers to the Aljunied GROs include Mr Anthony Loh, 75, Mr David Tay Poey Cher, 69, and Professor Brian Lee Chang Leng, 73. The fifth adviser is former Senior Minister of State (Foreign Affairs) Zainul Abidin Rasheed, 66, who was part of the PAP team that was defeated in the 2011 election.

Political analysts TODAY spoke to said the moves are not surprising, coming in the wake of earlier appointments of grassroots veterans at Aljunied GROs. **For example, Mr Loh replaced former Foreign Affairs Minister George Yeo in Bedok Reservoir-Punggol in 2012, said Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh.**

Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan said the PAP faces a dilemma in Aljunied and Hougang. Fielding a strong candidate with no guarantee of an electoral victory would upset the PAP's leadership plans, he said. If a weaker candidate is fielded, voters could feel they are not taken seriously.

The latest move also suggests that while the PAP considers Mr Choo — who also lost in the Hougang by-election in 2012 — and Mr Ong MP material, the party feels the ground in Aljunied and Hougang is not sweet enough. "The party is seeking to be realistic about electoral prospects," said Assoc Prof Tan.

Asked whether the move to place Mr Ong and Mr Choo in Sembawang and Tampines was intended to ensure they stand a higher chance of getting elected into Parliament, Dr Koh said the PAP knows there is no such thing as a stronghold and each constituency has to be taken seriously. Voters have become more demanding and will scrutinise the candidates, she added.

On whether the move would give them a better chance of getting into Parliament, both Mr Choo and Mr Ong stressed that yesterday's announcement was made by the PA — and not by the party.

The PA appointment and whether a candidate is fielded in the constituency where he is adviser are two separate matters, Mr Choo said.

“I think the PA is quite clear about this separation. Whether I will be fielded as a candidate in Tampines, that is something that is still very much (the) party's decision,” he added.

Contacted yesterday, Dr Kee, who hopes to do more for seniors in Kaki Bukit, said he is not interested in becoming an MP and prefers serving residents through grassroots work.

Media reports have identified chairmen of PAP branches in Aljunied GRC as potential candidates. The next General Election is due by January 2017.