

New face given task of winning Fengshan

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The People's Action Party (PAP) yesterday confirmed that new face Cheryl Chan, 38, will be fielded in the newly carved out Fengshan single-seat ward — an unusual move given that the PAP is expected to face a tough fight against the Workers' Party (WP) in the Single-Member Constituency (SMC), political analysts said.

The only other PAP candidate who will be making his electoral debut in an SMC in the coming General Election (GE) is senior IT manager Lee Hong Chuang, who will be fielded in the WP stronghold of Hougang.

While the PAP had as recently as 2013 fielded a new face, Dr Koh Poh Koon, to contest the Punggol East By-Election, the analysts pointed out that the PAP tends to field more seasoned campaigners to contest in single-seat wards.

The last time it fielded a female electoral debutant in an SMC was in 1988, said Singapore Management University (SMU) law don Eugene Tan.

Then, Dr Seet Ai Mee was fielded in Bukit Gombak, and won the seat.

Fengshan SMC was carved out from East Coast Group Representation Constituency (GRC) for the coming GE. Ms Chan, who was formally introduced along with the PAP candidates for East Coast GRC, has been involved in grassroots work in Fengshan for the past decade, and the PAP believes this would give her an edge.

Manpower Minister Lim Swee Say, who is the anchor minister for East Coast GRC, said that the ruling party learnt from the 2011 GE about the need for deeper engagement with residents.

He stressed that whether Ms Chan is a new candidate or an old-timer was less important compared to whether she has been engaging the residents deeply, and whether she will be able to continue to do so, he said.

He added that among the PAP candidates for East Coast GRC, it was unanimous that Ms Chan would be the best person to stand in the single-seat ward.

"None of us have the kind of deep engagement with the residents in Fengshan ... deeper, better, stronger, than Cheryl," Mr Lim said.

He also dismissed a suggestion that Fengshan SMC was carved out of the GRC, which the PAP had won by a 9.6 per cent margin in the 2011 GE, as it was the weakest link.

Mr Lim said that this is "completely untrue", adding that the PAP's performance in the five divisions under the GRC in the previous elections were "fairly even".

Ms Chan, who is the head of secondary industries at gas and engineering firm The Linde Group, replaces incumbent MP, former Cabinet Minister Raymond Lim, who is retiring from politics.

Brushing off suggestions that she could be a "sacrificial lamb", she said what is most important is for residents to judge which candidate can serve residents' interests.

Pointing out that she is a familiar face in Fengshan, Ms Chan said she is well aware of residents' issues, and that she did not see being a political newbie as a challenge.

The WP is tipped to field National University of Singapore sociologist Daniel Goh, 42, in Fengshan.

"Who that individual is ... does not matter to us," said Ms Chan, adding that it was about staying focused on her objective.

Displaying her familiarity with Fengshan, she quipped that the most famous dish at the hawker centre in the ward is not orh luak (oyster omelette), but bak chor mee (minced meat noodles), in response to a question from a reporter on WP chairman Sylvia Lim's recent Instagram post of a picture of her having orh luak at a hawker centre.

The picture was accompanied by a caption "The taste of Fengshan — heavenly!" and the hashtag #reasonstowin.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh noted that it is not the PAP's usual practice to "reward" long-term grassroots activists by giving them the chance to stand in elections.

"It will be interesting to see if that familiarity on the ground, that long-term service, will translate into strong-enough voter support to fend off a WP challenge," she said.