

PAP pick for Bukit Batok, Murali Pillai, 'well known in the area'

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The People's Action Party (PAP) is well aware that the Opposition holds the advantage in a by-election, which was why it chose a candidate with strong grassroots experience and a rapport with residents in Bukit Batok, party second assistant secretary-general Tharman Shanmugaratnam said yesterday as he introduced lawyer Murali Pillai as its candidate for the Single Member Constituency (SMC).

Mr Murali would be the second minority candidate fielded by the PAP in a single seat ward since the Group Representation Constituency system was introduced in 1988. The first was former Parliament Speaker Michael Palmer who stood in Punggol East SMC in the 2011 General Election. Mr Palmer resigned in December 2012 over an extramarital affair.

At a press conference yesterday, Mr Tharman was asked about the "by-election effect" — where opposition candidates traditionally have an edge because voters know the Government will not change.

"We're all aware of that and in choosing our candidate, we've taken that into account ... We know what the competition will be and we wanted to choose someone who will appeal to residents of Bukit Batok," he said, adding that Mr Murali "held everyone together" when former Bukit Batok MP Ong Chit Chung died in 2008.

Mr Murali was chosen as he knows Bukit Batok "extremely well" and is "totally dedicated to service", said the deputy prime minister.

"He's been serving here personally for over 16 years in various capacities ... He knows the volunteers, the residents, and they know him," Mr Tharman added, pointing out that the party already had Mr Murali in mind before Singapore Democratic Party chief Chee Soon Juan announced he was standing in the by-election last Sunday. Adding that he was unaware of the by-election date, Mr Tharman said the party waited a week before making their announcement to let things settle down on the ground after former MP David Ong's resignation and because Mr Murali had been out of the country.

Mr Tharman also attributed the Paya Lebar ward's good showing in the last General Election to Mr Murali's hard work on the ground. Mr Murali was part of the PAP's defeated team in Aljunied GRC in the polls last year.

Asked about his thoughts on going up against Dr Chee, a firebrand opposition politician who contested in his first elections in 1992, Mr Murali said: "As far as I'm concerned, politics is really about serving residents and I consider myself seasoned because I have put in quite a bit of time in serving residents' needs and that's really the focus."

On whether the fact that he is only the second minority candidate fielded by the ruling party in a single seat will have a bearing on his prospects in the by-election, Mr Murali pointed out that in both Paya Lebar and Bukit Batok, the proportion of Chinese residents is higher than the national average.

“I, of course, had to deal with the language barrier. But so long as I show I’m sincere in wanting to solve their issues, I could surmount it,” he said.

Mr Tharman also took a jibe at Dr Chee, who said the SDP would aim to run the town council better than the PAP if he is elected. Mr Tharman said it was good that Dr Chee has realised the importance of running a town council, in reference to the SDP’s proposal to the Workers’ Party to run a joint campaign in the 2013 Punggol East by-election whereby the SDP candidate would be the representative in Parliament while WP would run the town council.

With about 16 years of grassroots experience under his belt, political analysts said Mr Murali has a “more than equal” fight against Dr Chee in the polls.

Singapore Management University (SMU) law don Eugene Tan noted that Dr Chee has been involved in more General Elections but Mr Murali is also not a “fresh face”.

“This is shaping up to be an interesting and intense contest. Voters won’t regard both candidates as a mismatch,” said Associate Professor Tan. “Both parties are fielding strong candidates; an indication of the stakes involved.”

Institute of Policy Studies’ deputy director of research Gillian Koh pointed out that the constituency is made up of residents living in one- to four-room flats who are more concerned about the direct service that their MP can perform for them. “Dr Chee, being an opposition politician of national standing is likely to want to refer to his national role of being an alternative voice in public policy but he will have to find a way to translate what that means in practical terms to the voters there,” said Dr Koh.

Like the other analysts, National University of Singapore political scientist Reuben Wong did not think Mr Murali’s minority status would be a significant factor in the by-election, pointing out that other minorities and women have won SMCs in previous elections. “Especially for by-elections in SMCs, people are going to be looking closely at individual personalities very closely,” he added.