

Some opposition parties keen to work with Dr Tan Cheng Bock; analysts say he cannot be a 'one-man show'

Today, 19 January 2019

Several opposition parties expressed interest in working with former People's Action Party (PAP) Member of Parliament (MP) Tan Cheng Bock. This was after he announced on Friday (Jan 18) his intention to return to politics and start a new party called the Progress Singapore Party.

Nevertheless, they told TODAY that Dr Tan has not reached out to them since a meeting in July last year — attended by Dr Tan — which discussed his leadership of a possible political coalition.

Meanwhile, political observers said expectations of Dr Tan — who served as a PAP MP for 26 years until 2006 — will be high and while he has political clout, the 78-year-old will need to show that his new party will outlast him.

The Registry of Societies received Dr Tan's application on Wednesday and a spokesperson from the Ministry of Home Affairs said that the average processing time for a registration application is about two months.

"The application requirements for a political party are similar to those for most other societies, but in addition, in particular, its membership is restricted to Singapore Citizens only," the spokesperson said.

Dr Tan's announcement comes at a time when there is talk that the next General Election (GE), which is due by early 2021, could be held later this year.

The leaders of at least five opposition parties told TODAY that they are open to an alliance with Dr Tan.

Singapore's only opposition party with a parliamentary presence, the Workers' Party, declined to comment.

Most of the parties open to working with Dr Tan were also present at last year's meeting. They include the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), Singaporeans First Party, National Solidarity Party and Reform Party.

Dr Chee Soon Juan, secretary-general of the SDP, congratulated Dr Tan "for coming forward to participate in electoral politics again — this time with the opposition". Dr Chee said that he looked forward to the formation of Dr Tan's party and working with him to strengthen the opposition.

Mr Tan Jee Say, secretary-general of the Singaporeans First Party, said that while his party is hoping to work with Dr Tan, "we will talk about it after the approval of his party".

Others that are open to an alliance with Dr Tan include Mr Desmond Lim, chairman of the Singapore Democratic Alliance.

People's Power Party chief Goh Meng Seng said that he would wait for Dr Tan to make a move after forming the party, if he is interested in a coalition.

In his Facebook post on Friday, Dr Tan said that he and his team hope for the opportunity for Progress Singapore Party to be an alternative voice in Parliament. "In due course, as the party and candidates mature, we intend to be ready to govern the nation. In the meantime, we will work with those who share our political beliefs of country first — before either party or self," he wrote.

Law professor Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University said that Dr Tan is unlikely to view himself as Singapore's version of Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who returned from a 15-year hiatus and led the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition to topple the Barisan Nasional's uninterrupted 61-year rule in Malaysia.

"I don't think Dr Tan sees himself in that mould. It is certainly not even in Dr Tan's wildest dreams to expect the Progress Singapore Party to pull a PH (victory)," Associate Professor Tan said.

"We'd be getting ahead of ourselves if we think that Dr Tan and his new party would take over from the PAP at the next GE," he said.

Agreeing, former PAP MP Inderjit Singh said that unless Dr Tan can join forces with the Workers' Party, it is unlikely that an opposition coalition can be a force to be reckoned with.

Some may cross over

If approved, Dr Tan's party will become the 12th political party in Singapore, adding to the relatively crowded scene.

He said on Facebook that he had studied other options such as joining an existing opposition party, taking over an existing opposition party, or even running as an independent candidate.

The new party, which Dr Tan registered with 11 others including former PAP cadres, may create a churn among opposition parties, Assoc Prof Tan said.

"We shouldn't be surprised if members of other opposition parties like Dr Tan's vision, admire him as a respected politician, and there is a beeline to join his party," Assoc Prof Tan added.

While it is unlikely that any current or former PAP MPs will join his ranks, some "rank-and-file party cadres of Dr Tan's vintage" may cross over.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that a new political party will allow Dr Tan to choose his preferred personalities and create a distinctive brand.

"What is also clear is that he is trying to nurture the next generation of leaders — there is a big accent on renewing the opposition ranks," Dr Koh said.

"So, with eyes wide open as well as the experience of having been in the PAP camp, I think that Dr Tan will build up his base rather quickly as long as he does not have too many controversial characters in his founding circle," she said.

While Dr Tan has political clout, Mr Singh said that he will need time to build a strong team.

"(Dr Tan) cannot be a one-man show. If he is a one-man show, people will not buy into the party. So he has to make sure he has credible people, a strong team," Mr Singh said.

"If he can create the image of a party that looks like the PAP — credible people with good qualifications, good quality control — in the long term, he could make a big impact of a credible party that can represent people," Mr Singh added.

"The party should last longer than Dr Tan, that is something he needs to show."

Also in question will be how his proposed party is perceived by Singaporeans.

Assoc Prof Tan asked: "Will the (Progress Singapore Party) be moulded in the PAP that Dr Tan is familiar with, going back to the PAP roots?"

Mr Goh of the People's Power Party said. "How will the Singaporeans view (Dr Tan's party)? Is it a split from PAP? Or a totally brand new party? Whatever the case, we should not write off people who used to be PAP cadres or MPs."

Journey to the west?

Dr Tan, who retired as a doctor at the end of last year after practising for 50 years, was previously MP of Ayer Rajah Single-Member Constituency (SMC) between 1980 and 2006. The constituency was absorbed into the West Coast Group Representation Constituency (GRC) thereafter.

Analysts said that he will likely return to his old stomping ground, given his political capital there.

Right now, the MPs of West Coast GRC are Communications and Information Minister S Iswaran, former Cabinet veteran Lim Hng Kiang, Ms Foo Mee Har and Mr Patrick Tay.

Citing the high expectations surrounding Dr Tan, Mr Singh said the Progress Singapore Party should contest in a GRC if it wants to be considered a serious party.