

The grassroots edge, with youth on its side

Of the 24 new PAP candidates, only eight are from private sector

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Compared to their predecessors, the Class of 2011 — the last batch of which was introduced yesterday — appears short of corporate bigwigs but boasts instead of greater grassroots experience.

Among the 24 new People's Action Party candidates who will be sent to battle in the coming General Election, only eight are from the private sector: Three lawyers, two bankers, a commodities trader, a business consultant and a businessman.

Earlier, PAP leaders had spoken of the difficulties in luring talent from the private sector for a variety of reasons, including the risk that these prospective candidates would have to undertake in jettisoning their corporate suits for the PAP's white-on-white garb.

Previously, the private sector had been a fertile hunting ground for the PAP: From the 2001 batch of new candidates, Dr Ng Eng Hen, who was a private surgeon, and Mr Raymond Lim, who was managing director of Temasek Holdings, are now ministers. Among those in the 2006 cohort who have become office holders are former PSA CEO (South-east Asia and Japan) Grace Fu, ex-DHL general manager Teo Ser Luck and former SingTel vice-president Masagos Zulkifli.

Still, the latest batch have an edge over the previous two batches in terms of grassroots experience: More than half were involved in grassroots work for at least several months before they were unveiled.

And, as political observers have pointed out, the make-up of the PAP slate must be viewed in totality. And Dr Ng, who spoke at the press conference yesterday to unveil the latest batch, described its entire slate of 87 candidates — whose median age stands at 49 — as “a good balance of wisdom and experience”.

Overall, the PAP will field 20 women candidates, three more than the number fielded in 2006, which reflects “the higher ability and aspirations of women in Singapore”, said Dr Ng. For minority candidates, PAP will field 12 Malays, nine Indians and two Eurasians.

Dr Ng added that, this time around, the PAP was “specifically looking for people who could succeed as Cabinet ministers and office holders”.

He revealed that the party's senior leaders have seen the new candidates “five to six times” on separate occasions. The candidates were then grilled on their motivations and assessed if they could deliver under pressure. “This is the third generation leadership handing over our destiny and we want to make sure that these were men and women of substance,” said Dr Ng.

'More than seven' potential office holders

In the 2001 GE, the “Super Seven” were unearthed in the PAP's bumper crop of new candidates.

Apart from Dr Ng himself, the others were Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Mr Khaw Boon Wan, Mr Raymond Lim, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Mr Cedric Foo and the late Dr Balaji Sadasivan. With the exception of Mr Foo and Dr Balaji, the rest are currently in the Cabinet.

When asked if the number of potential office holders this time round will exceed the "Super Seven", Dr Ng said: "I think there will be more than seven."

Five names have already been mentioned: National Trades Union Congress assistant secretary-general Ong Ye Kung, 42; former Energy Market Authority chief executive Lawrence Wong, 39; former Monetary Authority of Singapore managing director Heng Swee Keat, 49; as well as former army generals Brigadier-General (NS) Tan Chuan Jin, 42; and Major-General (NS) Chan Chun Sing, 41.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan noted that none among the quintet are from the private sector. Said Assistant Professor Tan: "It's not so much a handicap, but they will have to work harder in order to make sure they have a good pulse of business requirements and realities."

Both he and Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, also felt that speculation surrounding the five men's political destiny should remain just that.

The bottom line, she noted, is how they perform eventually, if elected. Others such as ex-civil service high-flyer Sim Ann, 36, banker Foo Mee Har, 45, and commodities trader Ong Teng Koon, 34, are examples of other high quality candidates, Dr Koh noted.

At a National University of Singapore forum earlier this month, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reiterated that, for the new candidates, "character and values are as important as intellect and ability".

Still, independent scholar Derek da Cunha felt that there is a perception the Class of 2011 is not "of uniformly high calibre".

"There are some PAP candidates who are very good in terms of credentials and work experience, but there is at least one who is an outlier and this has puzzled many people," he said.

"There is a basic rule in politics: if a political party wants to have significant electoral appeal it has to ensure that no candidate it fields in an election will become the centre of controversy for whatever reason."

Still, what's clear is that the current slate has time on its side.

Thirteen of them are in their 20s and 30s, making this the youngest crop since the 1991 General Elections. The PAP will also be fielding its youngest candidate in three decades, Ms Tin Pei Ling. Among the new candidates, the median age has gone down to 39.5, compared to 41 in the previous two elections. The average age of 42.9, however, is slightly higher than in the 2001 and 2006 GEs.