

Punggol East by-election set for Jan 26

Timing of polls could yield advantages for PAP: Analysts

Amir Hussain

Today, 10 January 2013

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong called a surprise snap by-election in Punggol East yesterday, less than a month after former People's Action Party (PAP) Member of Parliament (MP) Michael Palmer resigned after confessing to an extramarital affair.

Nomination Day will be next Wednesday. Should there be more than one candidate who successfully files his papers, Punggol East voters will go to the polls on Jan 26 - about six weeks after Mr Palmer resigned on Dec 12.

The by-election comes less than a year after one was held in Hougang, following the expulsion of Workers' Party MP Yaw Shin Leong by his party. It will be the fourth election held in the Republic in less than two years - after the General Election and the Presidential Election in 2011, as well as the Hougang by-election.

Political analysts said a snap by-election in Punggol East - which drew mixed reactions from the Opposition parties eyeing the vacant single seat ward - could yield several advantages for the PAP. Among other things, Opposition parties eyeing the ward will have little time to walk the ground, or to possibly hammer out a deal to avoid a multi-cornered fight which will be more favourable to the PAP.

The PAP Government will also be able to quickly put behind Mr Palmer's resignation, and focus on important items on the national agenda, including the Budget, a White Paper on Population and Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) project.

In a press statement, Mr Lee said he advised the President yesterday to issue the Writ of Election.

Noting the "busy national agenda this year", Mr Lee said: "The White Paper on Population will soon be debated in Parliament. Budget 2013 is around the corner. The Our Singapore Conversation is translating the views of citizens into programmes to improve our lives. Sustaining economic growth and raising workers' incomes is a continuing preoccupation, especially in a weak global economy.

"I have decided to hold a by-election in Punggol East to give the residents their own MP in Parliament, before we focus back on these national issues."

Mr Lee said his first priority, following Mr Palmer's resignation, was to look after the Punggol East residents. To that end, Minister of State (Trade and Industry) Teo Ser Luck has been overseeing the constituency, while Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP Zainal Sapari has been chairing

the Pasir Ris-Punggol Town Council. "Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean has also taken a personal interest in the residents' welfare," Mr Lee said.

On the by-election, Mr Lee said: "I hope Punggol East residents will vote for the candidate who can best represent them in Parliament, solve their problems and improve their lives."

The Opposition parties have been urging Mr Lee to call a by-election in Punggol East sooner rather than later.

While Workers' Party chief Low Thia Kiang felt it was "good that the Prime Minister has decided to call a by-election as soon as possible", his Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) counterpart Chee Soon Juan criticised the move as "clearly a sign" of Mr Lee's "reluctance for the SDP's message to gain widespread traction".

Mr Low, as well as political analysts, noted that the PAP will enjoy the incumbent advantage by calling a snap by-election - and reducing the amount of time that Opposition parties can conduct outreach activities before the polls. More crucially, the analysts said, it leaves the Opposition parties precious little time to work out a deal.

Said National University of Singapore Associate Professor Hussin Mutalib: "The bigger worry for the Opposition must be how could they come together to then field only one candidate against the PAP, rather than the three to four that have been touted (which) would give the advantage to the PAP."

East Asian Institute Senior Research Fellow Lam Peng Er added: "If the opposition parties have been given a few months more, they may well have been able to cut a deal."

In the larger scheme of things, the by-election could be seen as a "distraction" to the PAP Government, the analysts pointed out. **Institute of Policy Studies Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh said a snap by-election is "a quick and neat way to close an unhappy chapter in Punggol East as resolutely as the situation was dealt with in December".**

Nominated MP Eugene Tan added: "I believe PM Lee would also like Singaporeans to focus on the big issues... It would be best to remove distractions as much as possible."

Last night, several PAP MPs also turned up at the party's Punggol East branch office to discuss preparations for the by-election. They included the party's Organising Secretaries, Mr Teo Ser Luck and Mr Chan Chun Sing. Colorectal surgeon Koh Poh Koon, widely speculated to be the PAP's by-election candidate, was also present.