

**Surgeon's appearance at Meet-the-People session another sign of looming by-election?**

# New face at Punggol East

REPORT: JUDITH TAN and KOH HUI THENG  
 tnp@sph.com.sg

**T**HERE was a new face at the Punggol East Meet-the-People Session yesterday evening.

Dressed in a white long-sleeved shirt and black dress pants, colorectal surgeon Koh Poh Koon was introduced by Minister of State for Trade and Industry Teo Ser Luck as "a friend and keen volunteer, who is here to observe, learn and understand the needs of the residents".

The New Paper learnt that Dr Koh is one of the partners of the new 31-bed Fortis Colorectal Hospital in Adam Road.

His appearance at the session seems to be yet another sign of the looming by-election in the single ward.

The seat was vacated last month after its MP, Speaker of Parliament Michael Palmer, resigned over an extramarital affair.

Pundits and political observers are placing their money on an earlier date – before Budget Day.

And going by the dates of Budget Day in the last three years:

- Feb 22, 2010
- Feb 18, 2011, and
- Feb 17, 2012

and with Feb 9 this year being the eve of Chinese New Year, it leaves only two possible dates for Polling Day:

- Jan 26, and
- Feb 2.

Counting down to the polls, if the days for campaigning strictly adhere to nine, then the the Writ of Election has to be released either on Jan 16 or as early as today.

Political watchers say calling for a by-election earlier would be more advantageous for the ruling party.

For one, the People's Action Party (PAP) branch machinery can be up and running since it was battle-ready as recently as May 2011.

Political commentator and Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan said the PAP would be able to "capitalise on the so-called 'incumbent advantage' – familiarity on the ground with voters and with the issues that affect them".

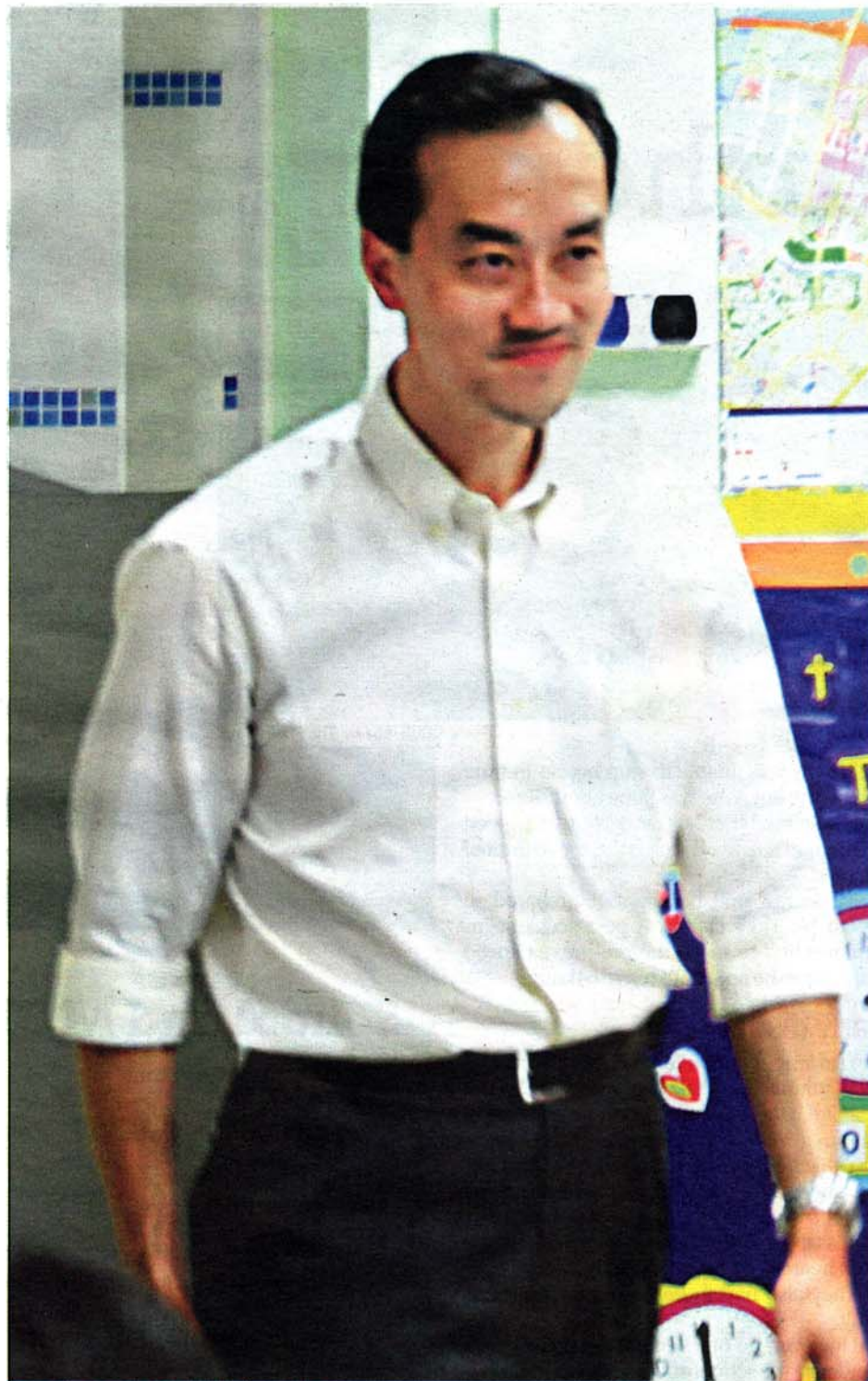
"The Opposition parties, which tend to be rather low profile in between general elections, may not be able to move as resolutely as the PAP," he added.

With the exception of Workers' Party, Prof Tan said the Opposition "certainly knows that the Punggol East voters may not be familiar with their parties, their platforms and their candidates".

"Hence, the SDP (Singapore Democratic Party) has already hit the ground running, knowing the enormity of the task ahead," he said.

Former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin told TNP that political leaders who want to get into Parliament "on the back of popular support must be committed to the areas they are contesting in".

Citing the examples of opposition leaders Chiam See Tong and Low Thia Khiang, Mr Zulkifli said they worked the grounds in



**MAKING AN APPEARANCE:** Mr Koh Poh Koon was introduced by Minister of State for Trade and Industry Teo Ser Luck as "a friend and keen volunteer, who is here to observe, learn and understand the needs of the residents". TNP PICTURE: BENJAMIN SECTOR

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– Political commentator and Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan

Potong Pasir and Hougang respectively even before they became MPs of the constituencies.

"Singaporeans want someone who is dedicated and committed to their needs, their causes. Here is where the PAP take great pains to say 'we are still here', even when they have not been voted in," he said, citing the example of Mr Sitoh Yih Pin in Potong Pasir previously.

## Party branding

Prof Tan said that even if the PAP candidate is an unknown, the party branding "will still count for something".

He said: "Should the PAP field a new candidate with no experience on the ground, then he will need time to know the ground and for voters to know him."

"But with the party being the incumbent, the learning curve is not as steep as it is for the opposition candidates."

A potential opposition candidate, who declined to be named, also expected the by-election to be called sooner rather than later – probably before the Budget.

He said: "Calling for an early by-election is to the advantage of the ruling party. It gives other parties no time to react and comb the ground."

"It also reflects how serious the interested parties are and (tests) their ability to respond to a snap by-election."

National Solidarity Party's former secretary-general Goh Meng Seng said: "the conventional thinking is to hold the (by-election) after the Budget".

He added: "Traditionally, the Government will give goodies to the people first, make them happy so the ground sentiments are in the ruling party's favour."

Holding the by-election earlier, before the other parties are ready, would be a wise move for the PAP, Mr Goh added.

As for the Action Information Management (AIM) issue, it remains to be seen what impact PM Lee's comments on the Ministry of National Development review of AIM dealings will have on defusing the issue which has caught attention in the online community, in particular.

## By-election action

- Some opposition parties – the Reform Party, Singapore Democratic Alliance, Workers' Party and Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) – have expressed interest in contesting the Punggol East seat.
- People's Action Party activists are submitting names for polling and counting agents. They are also buying the plywood used to reinforce election posters.
- A new face was introduced at the Punggol East meet-the-people session yesterday evening.
- SDP conducted its first walkabout in Punggol East on Sunday.