

CHANGE IN TACTICS IN RESPONSE TO A LESSON DRAWN FROM 2011 GE

PAP move to trot out potential candidates early surprising, say observers

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SINGAPORE – Political observers were surprised by the People's Action Party's (PAP) move to expose potential candidates early to the public eye, with the next General Election expected to be some time away.

This is a significant change in tactics, they said, adding that it was in response to one of the lessons the ruling party drew from the 2011 GE — that voters need time to familiarise themselves with new candidates.

Said Singapore Management University's Associate Professor Eugene Tan, who is also a Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP): "The fact that they are not keeping it under wraps does suggest that, certainly, one aim (of the PAP leadership) is to create awareness that they are exposing potential candidates to the voters at this early stage."

By putting potential candidates in the public eye early, the PAP could reduce the surprise factor and test

the waters, observers noted. Former NMP Siew Kum Hong said: "When you put out your (potential) candidates like this, it allows you to flush out any candidate who could turn out to be a lightning rod, well ahead of the GE."

Traditionally, the party would formally introduce its candidates in the weeks leading up to the elections. Before the formal introductions, the party tended to keep its cards close to its chest and potential candidates identified by the media were usually coy about standing for elections.

Earlier this month, the media reported on two new faces who have joined the grassroots branches in the Workers' Party-held Aljunied GRC. They were Ms Chan Hui Yuh, 37, a director at construction company Infra Waterproofing, and Mr Kahar Hassan, 45, a deputy director (infrastructure) with rail operator SMRT. Ms Chan was quoted as saying that she would do her best if party leaders fielded her in the coming GE.

On Sunday, another two potential

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candidates were spotted at the opening of an upgraded Residents' Committee Centre at Toa Payoh East Zone 2, where Defence Minister and PAP organising secretary Ng Eng Hen told reporters that potential candidates were already active on the ground even though the PAP was "not ready to announce them as candidates".

Speaking to the media afterwards, both Mr Chong Kee Hiong, 48, chief executive of OUE Hospitality REIT Management, and Mr Saktiandi Supaat, 40, head of foreign exchange research at Maybank, said they would be honoured by the opportunity to stand for elections as PAP candidates.

Former NMP Viswa Sadasivan noted that a criticism of the PAP in the previous elections was that it fielded candidates who came "out of nowhere, who appeared (at the) last minute". "Whereas now, this gives them credibility," he said.

Such a tactic comes with risk for the PAP, as it allows the opposition to "start formulating their campaign because they have a better sense of who they are competing against", Mr Viswa noted. "(The PAP is) demonstrating a certain amount of ... confidence because it's about letting the cat out of the bag," he said.

The observers reiterated that it was early days yet and the potential candidates could be dropped from the eventual slate. Former NMP Zulkifli Baharuddin said: "If you look at all the (potential) candidates revealed so far, they are not the typical grassroots people ... They are (exposed to the public eye) early to see if they are suitable."

On Sunday, Dr Ng reiterated that voters preferred candidates who had spent some time on the ground before the elections — a point he first made in an interview with Lianhe Zaobao published last month. During the interview, Dr Ng said that the earlier-than-usual deployment of potential candidates on the ground was in response to feedback after the 2011 GE.

On the profile of the potential candidates who have emerged so far, Assoc Prof Tan said the PAP appears to be using the same hunting grounds. But he pointed out that there is still time for the party to look for diverse candidates.

Mr Viswa reiterated that it is not about the jobs that the candidates hold, but their ability to relate. "It's perfectly all right if they are technocrats and professionals, but they have to ... have the ability to empathise, connect with the ground," he said. **ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY LAURA PHILOMIN**