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Citation

EUGENE, Tan K. B.. On the road to watershed hustings. (2014). *Straits Times*. A21-A21.

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On the road to watershed hustings

By EUGENE K.B. TAN
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

WITH just 23 months left in the 12th Parliament's five-year term, the next polls, which will have to be held latest by Jan 9, 2017, promise to be the watershed general election.

It will almost certainly be a straight fight between the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and the Workers' Party (WP), providing some indication of whether Singapore is evolving from a one-party dominant to a two-party political system.

The polls will also be crucial in determining the viability of a united opposition coalition and the relevance of marginal opposition parties.

Parties seek the best possible electoral outcomes, and will do what they can to maximise them. It's the nature of the beast.

In preemptive moves, the PAP has refreshed the leadership of its branches in the WP-held wards of Hougang, Aljunied and Punggol East and has started to informally introduce prospective candidates.

For Mr Ong Ye Kung, Mr Desmond Choo and Dr Koh Poh Koon, PAP's defeated candidates in GE2011 and by-elections in 2012 and 2013, the need for early

re-deployment is not just an imperative but an urgent one too.

The PAP has made the assessment that better electoral outcomes await them if they were not fielded in the previous wards where they contested and lost.

That being the case, it would be politically advantageous that their re-deployments take place sooner rather than later. This enables residents to get to know them better and provides ample time to work the ground and develop good rapport. They have their work cut out for them to show that they, and their running mates, are indeed deserving of being elected. While residents may initially view them as defeated PAP candidates moved from another (unwinnable) ward, the opportunity to see them in action and interact with them, can help them to engage the residents better. In the process, voters' initial ambivalence can change.

This way, the replacements of Mr Ong, Mr Choo and Dr Koh in their former wards will also have time to engage the ground.

To be sure, these movements to supposedly "safer" PAP Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) will reinforce the view that GRCs generally offer a smoother electoral passage for PAP first-time and previously unelected candidates. But, after



Supporters of the PAP (left) and WP on Nomination Day in 2011. The next GE will almost certainly be a straight fight between the two parties, providing some indication of whether Singapore is evolving from a one-party dominant to a two-party political system. ST FILE PHOTO

GE2011, GRCs are no longer sure wins for the PAP.

The GRCs cut both ways – parties can win big or lose disastrously as the Aljunied contest in GE2011 so vividly demonstrated.

We should expect the PAP (and WP, to a lesser extent) to showcase more of their prospective candidates in the next 12 months.

Save for civil servants and uniformed services officers who cannot engage in politics while in service, the aim of unveiling the prospective candidates is to avoid the

perception that they are "parachuted in" just before the polls.

Increasingly, voters expect to be properly courted and do not take well to PAP candidates presented as a fait accompli to them. Opportunistic moves that suggest voters are being taken for granted will likely see their comeuppance at the ballot boxes.

Where possible, the PAP will try to deploy potential candidates in their likely wards as early as possible. Even if they are subsequently fielded in other wards,

the exposure and experience would be useful.

In the next GE, we can expect PAP GRC teams to be more balanced. Gone are the days of lop-sided slates in which first-time candidates are packed in GRC slates helmed by senior ministers. We are likely to see the GRCs shed, to some extent, their image as convenient electoral vehicles for "greenhorns" and women candidates. But it remains unlikely that a first-time PAP candidate will be fielded in the single-member constituency.

The WP has fared relatively well in the eastern and north-eastern parts of Singapore in recent GEs. WP will seek to capitalise on the "domino effect" by focusing on PAP-held wards contiguous to theirs. The PAP has responded by making early changes and commitments to its East Coast and Tampines teams.

Mindful of the serious challenge of WP incumbency in Hougang, Aljunied and Punggol East, the PAP appears to have stabilised their line-ups in these wards.

Aljunied presents a continuing dilemma to the PAP. It badly needs a heavyweight politician to anchor the team but is unlikely to field a minister unless it believes it can decisively regain WP's political crown jewel. Otherwise, even fielding a junior minister would be

deemed too big a "risk". Since GE1991, all the PAP's GRC teams have been anchored by office-holders, mainly ministers.

The PAP is likely to deviate from this in Aljunied in the next polls. Should the WP field their "A-team" there, a PAP slate without a minister will not help PAP's cause. The PAP faces similar challenges in the single seats of Hougang and Punggol East if voters expect PAP to field their stronger candidates there.

In 2009, the Prime Minister told Parliament he would direct the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee to have fewer six-member GRCs as voters find it hard to identify with such large teams of MPs. One question that arises is whether GRCs will continue to shrink and if there will be a return of three-member GRCs, which were first and last used when the GRC scheme was introduced in the 1988 GE. If so, this is where junior office-holders or established MPs may anchor these PAP GRC line-ups.

The inter-election slumber is coming to a rapid end. Expect more changes and developments as the hustings draw nearer.

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