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PAP preparing potential new faces for media debut

Several turn up at HQ to undergo training in how to handle the press and field questions

By Peh Shing Huei and Lynn Lee

THE People's Action Party (PAP) is in the thick of preparing potential election candidates for their media debut, with several showing up for training at its Bedok party headquarters yesterday.

But as to whether the new faces would be unveiled soon, the party's first assistant secretary-general, Mr Wong Kan Seng, told The Straits Times: 'I'm not aware of any plan to unveil new candidates next week.'

He was referring to a report in Chinese daily Lianhe Zaobao yesterday, which said that the new PAP candidates for the upcoming general election would be introduced as early as next week.

Preparation work in the party is hotting up and it is decision-time on where to field people.

For example, the PAP's man in opposition-held Hougang, Mr Eric Low, told The Straits Times that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had told him he would be fielded in the ward again at the next election, which must be held before June next year.

Mr Low lost to Workers' Party incumbent Low Thia Khiang at the 2001 polls.

At party headquarters yesterday, The Straits Times spotted at least six potential PAP candidates attending media training.

Among them were: Autism Resource Centre president Denise Phua, 46, eye surgeon Lim Wee Kiak, 37, and lawyer Hri Kumar, 39.

When contacted, Dr Lim declined to comment. He has been carrying out grassroots work in Marsiling, while Ms Phua is a member of the Jalan Besar PAP branch.

Mr Teo Ser Luck, 37, general manager of courier company DHL, who is active in grassroots work in Pasir Ris-Punggol and Chong Pang, was also spotted outside the building. But he said he was there for a kopitiam breakfast.

Party sources revealed that the session, among other things, dealt with learning how to handle the press and field questions during the hustings. More candidates are expected to attend similar training this weekend.

MP Seng Han Thong of Ang Mo Kio GRC, formerly a senior Zaobao journalist, was among the trainers.

Mr Ong Kian Min of Tampines GRC, a two-term MP, said that the training usually focused on TV appearances.

'We were told to avoid shifting our eyes or having too many gestures when speaking in front of the

camera,' he said, adding that they were filmed, and that they reviewed their clips in order to improve.

Apart from such training, the party also puts potential candidates under the tutelage of more senior MPs on the ground, where they learn to work with grassroots leaders and residents.

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew said last month he expected at least 20 young PAP candidates.

Among the new faces seen working on the ground are a Malay doctor in her 30s, as well as a female lawyer and a civil servant, both in their early 40s.

Party sources say the slate is not finalised, as its famed tea sessions, at which potential fresh faces are identified, are still continuing.

Some potential PAP candidates are also going for their final round of interviews next week, at which they will meet almost the entire Cabinet.

Although PM Lee said on Sunday that the party was ready to unveil its new candidates, the PAP is known to include candidates at the very last minute.

MP Penny Low of Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC was one of those who signed on just days before Nomination Day in 2001, skipping the tea sessions that most candidates have to go through. 'When you come in at such a late stage, the key is to prepare yourself mentally to be a candidate,' she said.

Not all short-listed names end up being fielded, even if they went for training.

As Aljunied GRC MP Cynthia Phua says: 'Until the last minute, you don't know whether you are in or out.'

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