PAP: ‘A major upgrade’

BY CHIANG AI-LIEN

Operating system: The People’s Action Party (PAP) was inaugurated in 1954 at Victoria Memorial Hall, with its members turning up in short sleeves to show solidarity with workers. Its founders included a group of overseas-educated young men – Mr Lee Kuan Yew, who was the party’s first secretary-general and Singapore’s first prime minister; Dr Toh Chin Chye, the party’s first chairman; Mr S. Rajaratnam and a group of leftists. Its goal: to rid Singapore of British colonialism and build a more fair and equal society.

2G version: Its electoral foray in 1955 at the first Legislative Assembly election was against the Singapore Labour Front and six other parties. Out of 25 seats, Labour Front won 10 seats, and the PAP three.

After four years in opposition, the PAP swept to power in 1959, winning 43 out of 51 seats, in the first fully elected, post-colonial government. By 1966, it waved goodbye to any opposition in Parliament, when the biggest opposition party, Barisan Sosialis, boycotted Parliament to rid Singapore of British colonialism and build a more fair and equal society.

In 2001, it raised the stakes by inducting the “Super Seven”, seven rookie MPs with ministerial potential – Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Mr Khaw Boon Wan, Dr Ng Eng Hen, Mr Raymond Lim, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Mr Cedric Foo and the late Dr Balaji Sadasivan – five of whom went on to become full ministers.

In 2006, in an effort to rejuvenate its ranks, more than half of its new candidates were from the “post-65 generation”. It picked up 66.6 per cent of votes in 1997.

Market response: Of late, criticisms about the “more of the same” predictability of its slate – typically consisting of labour unionists, civil servants and army officers – have got louder. Analysts say the PAP runs the “risk of inbreeding” by focusing on such a narrow pool of public sector talent.

A recent Straits Times survey on the young aged between 21 and 34, who will form over a quarter of the electorate this year, also shows that unlike their parents, they are less attached to the ruling party and have a more favourable impression of opposition parties.

Enhancements: Since the last elections, the PAP has leapt onto new media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to reach out to the young. Its women’s wing and youth wing have rolled out more activities from policy dialogues to study trips, even organising activities at hip nightspots like Zouk.

Spreadsheet: Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong says half of the PAP’s new candidates for this General Election can be “more than backbenchers”. At least five new candidates have been shortlisted as potential ministers: Major-General (NS) Chan Chun Sing, 42, who was unopposed in Tanjong Pagar GRC; Brigadier-General (NS) Tan Chuan-Jin, 42, who is running in Marine Parade GRC; labour movement assistant secretary-general Ong Ye Kung, 41, in Aljunied GRC; former Monetary Authority of Singapore managing director Heng Swee Keat, 49, in Tampines GRC; and former Energy Market Authority head Lawrence Wong, 38, in West Coast GRC.

What users say: The PAP has made fourth-generation (or 4G) leadership renewal the central plank of this election, in its bid to shake off its austere image and remain relevant to the young, say analysts.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan noted: “In a sense, it is a major upgrade in that the accent on young Singaporeans aged 21 to 35 has taken on much greater prominence since the last GE in 2006.”

The PAP has also tried to re-emphasise and refresh its solidarity with the average Singaporean worker, as manifest in its bumper crop of seven trade unionists as new PAP candidates, he added. “However, many of them have spent more time at the NTUC headquarters and so may not have strong grassroots experience like those of past generations.”

“Overall, the party needs to maintain its broad-based appeal and to continually update its image,” said Assistant Professor Tan. “Being the dominant political party can present the party with a forbidding image. So it has to soften its no-nonsense image.”