

Chasing that elusive PR

Higher rejection rates means foreigners may seek home elsewhere



By TEH JOO LIN



By MELISSA KOK

FOREIGNERS seeking permanent residency (PR) are bracing themselves for rejection as they react to the news that the number of people given PR status was halved last year.

Still, many of those seeking PR status interviewed by The Straits Times this week are adopting a wait-and-see attitude. Most of those rejected remain undeterred and plan to reapply.

However, there are some who are contemplating a move to countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

In the clearest sign that the Government is responding to concerns over too large an influx of foreigners, the PR intake fell to a five-year low last year.

Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng revealed this week that the country granted PR status to 29,265 foreigners last year, fewer than half of the 59,460 passes given out the year before.

In 2008, around 79,200 foreigners were granted PR, more than the 63,600 in 2007 and 57,300 in 2006. The drop follows the Government's move in 2009 to tighten the PR and citizenship criteria.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong set out the Government's thinking on the issue during his National Day Rally speech last year when he said it was time to slow the pace of accepting new citizens and PRs, as well as foreign workers.

"We can't continue going like this and increasing our population 100,000, 150,000 a year indefinitely and we should give Singaporeans time to adjust, and our society time to settle and integrate better the new arrivals. But we must not close ourselves up."

The Straits Times understands that current applicants face more stringent eligibility criteria such as a higher income bar and residential requirements to ensure they can contribute to Singapore economically and integrate well.

An online tool on the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority's (ICA) website which applicants could previously use to gauge their chances of success was also removed last March as part of the changes.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said the sharp drop in PR intake marks a return to the trend of 1996 to 2004, when an average of 30,000 foreigners were granted PR annually.

He said: "Maybe this is a sustainable rate, given limited resources such as land and infrastructure constraints, and the degree of psychological comfort with that rate among Singaporeans in the past."

The Straits Times interviewed 15 foreigners trying for PR status.

Among those who had their applications rejected in the past year is Bangladeshi businessman Md Tofazzal Hossain, who has been turned down three since 2008, most recently a month ago.

The 45-year-old employment pass holder, who runs five businesses including restaurant and catering outfits and trading companies, says he hires 44 local workers and has pumped in more than \$1 million into his holdings here since 2006.

Pointing to his gold Rolex watch, he said: "I like Singapore. I can wear this watch here. If I wear it in my home country, someone will chop off my hand."

"But now I am thinking of going to do business in other countries."

Another foreigner, a 39-year-old German marketing director, said he was shocked when the rejection letter came last September after a nine-month wait.

The master's degree holder, who declined to give his name for fear it might affect his chances, has been working here for about four years and is on a personal-

ised employment pass, which allows non-Singaporeans to work here without being tied to a specific employer.

He married a Singaporean earlier this month. "I want to settle down here... I want to contribute. I am not here to take jobs away from Singaporeans or exploit the system. But if it (rejection) happens a second time, too bad. I might go somewhere else," he said.

Chinese national Wang Xiao Ying, who came here as a student in 2003 and is now working as a human resources consultant, said she will keep trying despite her rejection last October.

The 23-year-old advanced diploma holder said: "I have lived here for so long. All my friends are here, including many locals. I hope the Government can loosen up the policy for those like me. But maybe the timing now isn't right."

The Government does not disclose specific eligibility criteria to applicants.

On the ICA website, only the types of foreigners who qualify for PR are listed: they include S-Pass and employment pass holders, and the aged parents of Singapore citizens.

Immigrant associations, MPs and relocation specialists said they had observed that even young and well-educated foreigners have had difficulty making the cut for PR in the past year.

Mr Tony Du, president of Tian Fu Club an association for new Chinese immigrants mainly from Sichuan province, said more than 10 club members - all employment pass holders who are graduates from China and Singapore and mostly below 30 years old - had their PR applications rejected in the past two years.

MPs Charles Chong (Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC) and Halimah Jacob (Jurong GRC) made similar observations.

Previously, the people who came to him for help in PR applications were less qualified, said Mr Chong.

Madam Halimah added that while there is a wide spectrum of people who come to her with problems obtaining PR, "the more educated ones have increased significantly enough for me to notice".

She reckons that degree holders being rejected may mean that the criteria have become a lot more stringent, or that the degrees that the rejected applicants hold may not be that well recognised.

Mr Satish Bakdha, a manager at immigration specialist Rikvin, said that for much of last year, its clients faced a high rate of rejections - about three in 10 between March and September.

"Even good cases were rejected," he said, referring to employment pass holders who were degree holders and well-heeled - earning more than \$120,000 a year.

Some foreigners are now looking at other options, says Aims Immigration, which specialises in relocation.

Compared to 2009, the firm received 20 per cent more queries last year from foreigners asking about relocation. They include current PRs who fear their re-entry permits will not be renewed.

Senior consultant Elsie Liow said: "Now that the security is not there anymore, they are looking for alternative places to move to."

Those who are staying put say they remain optimistic about getting PR - eventually.

Canadian Erica Denison, 33, and her husband are considering holding back their applications because of talk that the opening in the door will widen after the general election.

"I am kind of holding back a bit because we are wondering if we need to be strategic about when we apply," said the client manager.

Some are speculating that applications submitted after the general election, which must be held by February next year, might be more successful.

Their reasoning? The Government would feel less pressure to bow to public sentiment against the influx of foreigners.

But Madam Halimah dismissed the link between PR applications and elections.

She said: "I don't think it's got anything to do with before or after the elections. Policies cannot be changed on that basis. The issue is one of the relevance and value that they (foreigners) are bringing to the economy and society."

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Additional reporting by Lim Yi Han and Neo Wen Tong



Mr Kibria and his daughter Kashfia, who is in kindergarten. His son is in Primary 5. The family moved here in 2008. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

Father of two hopes he will be third time lucky

Md Shahjahan Kibria, 44

Qualifications: MBA from University of Lucknow in India, Master of Commerce from University of Dhaka in Bangladesh, and certified as a professional forensic accountant by the Institute of Certified Forensic Accountants.

Applied for PR in: May 2009, March 2010 and November 2010

Rejected in: September 2009 and May 2010. No word yet on latest application.

The Bangladesh national came with his family in 2008, drawn by Singapore's

schools and safe environment. The employment pass holder works as a finance manager drawing \$3,800 a month.

"If I don't get PR, I don't know what to do. Now I can stay - I have work but I don't know for how long, it depends on the company and economy."

His daughter, five, is in kindergarten while his son, 11, is in Primary 5 in Stamford Primary. Mr Kibria said: "My son doesn't want to go to any other place. He is familiar with the education system and likes it here."

TEH JOO LIN



Ms Astillero says she would like to be a Singapore permanent resident and even a citizen as she likes the job prospects and living environment here. ST PHOTO: TED CHEN

Rejected but hoping to try again

Leah Astillero, 33

Qualifications: Degree in accountancy from Letran College in Manila, the Philippines

Applied for PR in: April 2009

Rejected in: December 2009

Ms Astillero, who is single, came in 2007 because of better job prospects and living environment. Her two sisters and their families live and work here too. Her younger sister is a PR, her older sister has an employment pass.

Ms Astillero, an employment pass holder who earns less than \$5,000 a month, said her friends with similar qualifications applied in 2007. "I think it was easier for them to get PR then," she said, adding that she had heard from people that it may be better to reapply after the general election.

"I certainly will look forward to being a PR, even a citizen," she added.

MELISSA KOK



Mr Wang is a senior safety manager in the construction industry. He says he likes Singapore and is used to life here but if he fails to get PR status, he will return to Sichuan. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Waiting for outcome of 3rd appeal

Wang Wen Xiong, 38

Qualifications: Diploma in Construction from Fulun Yucai Vocational Middle School in Sichuan and several certificates in his field, including those from NTUC Learning Hub and the Construction Industry Development Board.

Applied for PR in: April 2009

Rejected in: August 2009

IN HIS 15 years in the construction industry here, the Sichuan native, who now holds an S-Pass, has risen to the post of senior safety manager.

After his application for PR was rejected, his company appealed - thrice - on his behalf, but the first two appeals were unsuccessful. He is awaiting a reply to the third appeal.

Mr Wang, who is single, earns about \$3,800 per month. He looks forward to settling down here, but has been stymied by his failures to secure PR status.

He said: "The Government recognises the importance of foreign talent, but instead of bringing in more people, why not give someone who is already here, like me, the PR pass?"

His friends have suggested that he look elsewhere, but Singapore remains his first choice. He said: "I've been here for a long time and I'm used to the lifestyle here. I really like Singapore... But if I still don't get the PR pass on my next application, I'll return to Sichuan."

LIM YI HAN

Rejected applicants may try again

THE Government welcomes rejected PR applicants to give permanent residency (PR) another shot, especially as their economic contributions rise over time and as they stay longer here.

Some foreigners with "good potential" to contribute economically to Singapore and integrate into the society may have failed in their applications because of the tightening of criteria, said a spokesman for the newly set up National Population and Talent Division.

Responding to queries from The Straits Times, the spokesman said: "We welcome them to try again, especially as their economic contributions rise over time, and as they stay longer in Singapore."

"Some of those who are not eligible for PR at this stage could become eligible later on."

While the PR intake has been cut to calibrate the inflow of immigrants, foreigners who can contribute to the

economy and society, integrate well and are committed to "sinking their roots" here are still welcomed, said the spokesman.

The division said that every application is assessed "holistically". Most of the success cases qualified on the basis of the main applicants' contribution as professionals, and technical and skilled workers.

Among other things, factors such as the applicant's economic contributions, ability to integrate into the society, commitment to sinking roots in Singapore, and age, are taken into consideration, said the spokesman.

The profile of the main applicant's immediate family members, if they also wish to naturalise, is also a consideration.

The spokesman added: "Others who were granted PR would primarily constitute immediate family members of Singapore citizens, usually spouses."