

Ex-cop is face of Singapore opposition in general elections

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As the day turns into night, they gather in the green field in the eastern corner of this island nation just above the equator. Some have come with foldable stools, some with picnic mats while others settle down on bare grass waving blue flags and yellow inflatable hammers. Soon the crowd swells to about 30,000, waiting to hear the star of the night's show -- opposition leader Sylvia Lim.

A policewoman-turned law teacher-turned-politician, Lim is the face of Singapore's resurgent opposition that just three elections ago in 2001 had hit a political nadir. Its leader, the late J.B. Jeyaretnam who attained folklore stature in the country's politics, had been bankrupted after contesting a series of lawsuits unleashed by the ruling People's Action Party. The Workers' Party and another opposition group had only one seat each in the 84-member Parliament.

As Singapore heads into another general election on Friday, the PAP is set to extend its 50-year hold on power by another five years. Only, this time the inheritors of Jeyaretnam's mantle — Lim and her colleagues in the Workers' Party — are presenting the stiffest challenge ever faced by the PAP, and will likely emerge as a potent force in what has been a virtual one-party state.

"Have you seen how the PAP deals with the opposition? You need a lot of guts to come out and speak up against them," said oil technician Voon Swee Heng, 59 at Lim's rally last Sunday where blue party flags with the hammer symbol abounded. "I like to hear her talk. She flags out Singaporean issues like that of the population, train breakdowns and education. Things that concern me," he said.

The Workers' Party is riding an anti-establishment wave, thanks to the disenchantment with the PAP over the rising cost of living, income inequality, restrictions on freedom of expression, and a rising tide of immigration to fill not only low-paying jobs but also middle and high-paying positions.

The frustrations have eroded the popularity of the PAP. Led by Singapore's founding leader Lee Kuan Yew (who died in March), the party established itself through an enviable track record after taking the reins of power in 1965 when Singapore became independent.

The PAP government raised standards of living by attracting foreign investors, promoting a free market, emphasizing education and running an efficient, largely corruption free government and civil service. Today, the annual per capita income in Singapore is \$56,287, slightly more than the U.S., making them the ninth and 10th richest nations in the world.

"Sure the key (election) issue more broadly will be about a government and opposition movement that is able to ensure that Singapore enjoys effective and good government," said Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. "A socially inclusive Singapore that is prosperous because it is innovative, and where people always feel hopeful about making progress in their lives."

While Singapore prospered, Lee and his successors also maintained strict controls on free speech and politics. Government critics including opposition leaders and foreign media were

slapped with expensive — and successful — defamation and libel lawsuits. Mainstream local media remain controlled by the government. Some opposition leaders were locked up. Public gatherings and demonstrations without police permit remained banned until 2000, when the rule was relaxed. Demonstrations are now allowed, but only in the Hong Lim park designated for such activities.

The party also used a unique electoral rule to its advantage -- some constituencies are contested in groups of four to six members. The opposition was hard pressed to find enough candidates to contest, and the PAP won many seats uncontested.

But the opposition is catching up as more young people throw their lot with them.

In 2001, the PAP won 55 seats uncontested and 37 in 2006, but only five in 2011.

This year, for the first time in Singapore's history, opposition parties are contesting all 89 seats at stake. The Workers' Party, which holds seven seats in the outgoing Parliament, is fighting for 28 seats, most of them in its stronghold of eastern Singapore.

"I think it's all very healthy. There is an aspiration for Singapore to be developed, in terms of its democratic processes as well. It's very hard for Singaporeans to live in a cocoon," Lim, 50, told The Associated Press.

Although it is clear that the Workers' Party cannot form the government either by itself or in a coalition, the enthusiasm for its rallies has not diminished.

The turnout at Lim's speeches dwarfs the crowd seen at those of PAP candidates who typically draw a few hundred people to 3,000 at the most.

"Stability does not come from bullying, stability does not come from control, and stability certainly does not come from suing those who criticize you," Lim thundered at Sunday night's rally in Simei neighborhood to loud cheers from a fired up crowd.

She had arrived a little earlier unaccompanied, passing through police barricades to the back of stage, as another candidate was speaking.

Quiet as she is with entrances, her snarky, resounding and hard-hitting speeches slamming the PAP have carved their way into being a crowd favorite. Together with party leader Low Thia Khiang, a Chinese-educated businessman, whose speeches in the Teochew dialect have captivated audiences since he won his first seat in 1991, the two make a formidable team.

Low took over the party's helm after Jeyaretnam was declared bankrupt in 2001 for failing to keep up with payments for libel damages. By law, a bankrupt cannot hold a legislative seat.

Lim, the party No. 2, masterminded a spectacular campaign in the 2011 elections, in which the PAP received just 60 percent of all votes cast in its worst electoral performance. It has lost two by-elections since.

Lim says her winning a seat in 2011 was confirmation that Singaporeans wanted credible alternative voices.

"So voters of the East, look to the future, look to a new dawn. At daybreak, the blue sky can first be seen in the East," she told the crowd.

Lim is in a relationship with local football legend Quah Kim Song, who drives her to and from rallies. Unlike some stiff PAP politicians, Lim comes across as a warm person. She has gained a growing social media following after sharing personal pictures and anecdotes online.

After three years as a police inspector, Lim started on her legal career, most recently being law lecturer at Temasek Polytechnic until 2011. She has a law degree from the National University of Singapore and a postgraduate degree from the University of London.

"She was passionate when she taught, and I'm sure she's passionate about politics as well. I like that she is down to earth, capable and responsible," said Lim's former student, Linisha Kapur, 24, who was at the rally Sunday.

After the three-hour rally ended, Lim slipped into the shadows in minutes.

The crowd stayed, chanting the party's name.