

Singapore's ruling party in unprecedented electoral contest

Annabelle Liang

Associated Press, 1 September 2015

Singapore's political parties officially started campaigning Tuesday for general elections in which, for the first time in the island-nation's history, the ruling People's Action Party faces contests in all available seats.

Although the PAP is expected to return to power in the Sept. 11 elections, the vote will demonstrate the growing strength of the opposition, which had largely remained emasculated for decades. It is now riding an anti-establishment wave, thanks to the disenchantment with the ruling party over the rising cost of living, 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.

"Last time I was not interested in politics, I didn't care. But the more I look at it now, the more I feel it isn't right," said Jon Chan, 52, who is unemployed.

"We are turning our citizens into a minority, and giving Singapore to foreigners on a silver platter. We should have a Singaporean Singapore," he said.

Singapore citizens currently make up 61 percent of the country's 5.47 million people, many of them recent migrants. The population is expected to increase to 6.5 million or even 6.9 million by 2030 of which 45 percent will be foreigners, partly to tackle low birth rates.

While official campaigning starts Tuesday, most parties have already introduced their candidates through press conferences, videos and savvy mobile applications.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong urged voters to give his party — in power since Singapore's birth 50 years ago — a "fresh and strong mandate" in setting the direction for the next 50 years.

"The PAP will fight to win every vote. Your future is at stake. Our future is at stake. And the PAP carries a heavy responsibility for this future," said Lee, 63.

The current parliament has 87 elected seats, of which the PAP holds 80 and the opposition Workers' Party 7. In the Sept. 11 elections, the number of seats will be raised to 89.

While it may appear that the PAP won the 2011 general election by a landslide, it did so with 60 percent of all votes in its worst electoral performance. Since then it has lost two by-elections.

An electoral system in which some constituencies are represented by a group of four to six lawmakers has helped to boost the winning party's numbers. This time, 16 wards will be contested in groups, while 13 others will be contested individually. In previous elections, the PAP's power was so absolute that the opposition could not even gather enough candidates to contest all constituencies.

But over the years, the opposition began attracting more supporters and candidates willing to contest, despite knowing that they will most likely lose.

In 2011, the only constituency left uncontested was the five-member ward of Tanjong Pagar, led by Singapore's founding father and former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who died in March at age 91. Lee, the father of the current prime minister, is widely credited with Singapore's progress from a colonial backwater to a modern economic hub.

This time, the opposition will field candidates in all constituencies. Still, the main opposition Workers' Party has put up candidates for 28 seats - not enough to form the government even if it wins all.

On Tuesday, candidates filed their election papers at nine schools designated as nomination centers, and paid a deposit of 14,500 Singapore dollars (\$10,300) to become eligible to contest in the election.

"Sure, the key 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.