

Candidates need to react to how voters respond to their campaign, say analysts

Imelda Saad

Channel News Asia, 16 May 2012

Analysts have said that both the People's Action Party and Workers' Party candidates will have to be careful in the way they approach their by-election campaigns.

But from the onset, both parties have also set very different agendas.

The ruling PAP has couched this by-election as a local contest.

Its candidate Desmond Choo is banking on the programmes he has introduced in the single-seat constituency.

He has rolled out these programmes for Hougang residents over the past year as their grassroots advisor.

The Workers' Party, on the other hand, by virtue of the fact that it has held Hougang for 20 years, is expounding on the need for the party to defend the seat, so that the party continues to offer an alternative voice in Parliament.

Analysts say the party that can address both local and national issues will get the upper hand.

Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said: "Residents in Hougang are concerned about cost-of-living issues, the place of foreigners in Singapore, land transport issues, whether they have their buses, and hawker centres.

"And all these issues, though they are questions of facilities locally, are all part of national programme and national policy. So it's actually rather difficult to just segment it that way, to say that it is local and not national, or national only.

"So I think you have national policies, and the question is how would they translate locally to the people's lives in Hougang. And it's the candidate that's able to pull these together, I think, that would be able to reach out and move the ground."

Analysts add that while candidates can set the agenda at the early stage, they would eventually have to react to how voters respond to their campaign.

Assistant Professor Eugene Tan, Law Faculty at the Singapore Management University, said: "A party that stubbornly sticks to its original form of characterisation and doesn't respond or engage the voters, will not come out looking that good.

"So in the early days, I think we'll see the parties set the agenda, trying to reinforce what are the key themes. But ultimately they must put a very close ear to the ground, to understand what are the concerns of voters.

"It's a dynamic process. So it's not Party A saying it's a local election, so let's deal with local issues alone. In the end, they need to respond, they need to engage and assure voters that their candidate if voted in, would be able to deliver on the various promises."

Candidates have nine days to campaign.

Two sites in Hougang can be used for rallies during the campaigning period.

One is the open field in front of Block 837, bounded by Hougang Avenue 4 and Hougang Central.

The other site is Hougang Stadium in Hougang Avenue 2.