

## **GE2020: Low Thia Khiang's departure could give Workers' Party a boost, say observers**

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The departure of former Workers' Party (WP) chief Low Thia Khiang from electoral politics may bolster rather than dampen the party's chances in Aljunied GRC, political observers said.

After more than 30 years in politics, Singapore's longest-serving opposition Member of Parliament (MP) will not contest in the 2020 General Election.

Mr Low, 63, and fellow Aljunied team member Chen Show Mao, 59, are making way for younger WP members Gerald Giam and Leon Perera.

The other three members in the Aljunied GRC team for this election are WP chief Pritam Singh, party chair Sylvia Lim and vice-chair Faisal Manap. Mr Singh said on Friday (Jun 26) that they will be defending their seats.

WP won the five-member GRC from the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in the 2011 General Election. The opposition party held on to the Aljunied constituency at the 2015 polls, but with a narrower vote margin of 50.96 per cent. The PAP team led by veteran MP Yeo Guat Kwang garnered 49.04 per cent of the votes.

Observers expect the GRC, home to 151,007 voters, to be one of the hot seats to watch this time round.

But while some voters are disappointed by Mr Low's departure, the move may not necessarily be bad news for the incumbents, observers said.

"I don't see the change in line-up as affecting negatively the WP's prospects in Aljunied GRC," said Associate Professor of Law Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University.

"Low's stepping aside may well galvanise support for the WP, at least in Aljunied and Hougang."

At WP stronghold Hougang, Mr Png Eng Huat will make way for lawyer Dennis Tan, a former Non-Constituency Member of Parliament who ran in Fengshan SMC in 2015.

Hougang SMC was held by Mr Low from 1991 until 2011, when he left to lead the GRC team in Aljunied. It was a bold move that paid off, as WP gained five parliamentary seats and became the first opposition party in Singapore to win a GRC.

That win in a GRC - once thought insurmountable by opposition politicians - may have helped encourage a resurgence of opposition activity in 2015, when all the constituencies were contested, and there were no walkovers for the first time since Singapore's independence.

Given that "watershed moment", Mr Low stepping down could create a "nostalgic effect", said Dr Mustafa Izzuddin, senior international affairs analyst at Solaris Strategies Singapore.

“(Mr Low) stepping down is a nostalgic moment in the electoral history of Aljunied and Hougang ... it invokes memories of Low Thia Kiang and the contributions he’s made to Hougang and Aljunied, and that might boost the chances of WP winning Aljunied,” he said.

He added that Mr Low has made connections with the electorate in Hougang and Aljunied, and the fact that he will no longer contest “could invoke memories of that personal connection”.

## **PARTY RENEWAL**

Analysts noted that Mr Low is stepping down after having handed the party reins to Mr Singh in 2018, and having built up a group of younger leaders in the party.

“I think that some voters in Aljunied GRC will be disappointed but most will have noticed that Mr Low had set up the leadership transition to Mr Pritam Singh over many years. He has also built up a group of younger leaders, ensuring that his members take up the NCMP roles to achieve some national profile,” said Dr Gillian Koh, deputy research director at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

She also noted that Mr Low had a fall at home earlier in the year and needed treatment in the intensive care unit. The party said on May 22 that he was discharged from hospital.

“When he took a fall recently, I am sure people will have anticipated that there would be a chance he might not run. What is also a surprise for the Aljunied team is the news that Mr Chen Show Mao will not contest in GE2020 also,” she said.

A WP star candidate in 2011, Mr Chen challenged Mr Low for the party leadership in 2016 but failed in the attempt.

Political analyst Dr Felix Tan of SIM Global Education said that it was “a bit of a surprise” to see three senior party members not contesting GE2020, but that this was not unique to WP.

“After all, it does send a message that the WP trusts their new leaders,” he said. “This would be a watershed election, not only because of an unprecedented crisis – many second- and third-generation leaders are stepping aside to let the new team take over the reins.”

Despite the generational change, WP has picked familiar faces to be fielded in Aljunied, with Mr Perera and Mr Giam both being former NCMPs and having spent time working the ground in the GRC.

“You need someone with experience, credentials and knows Aljunied well enough ... Both of them have been in the political scene for a considerable amount of time,” Dr Mustafa said.

Noting that retaining Aljunied GRC will be the WP’s priority, he added: “They have to put their A-team there and they consider Gerald (Giam) and Leon (Perera) as A-team material.”

Dr Mustafa also pointed out that even if Mr Low, Mr Chen and Mr Png have decided not to contest the coming elections, the party has said that their decision was not a retirement and that they will continue to mentor the party’s next-generation leaders.

“It’s always good to have orderly change that allows the party to grow and mature,” he said.

Said IPS' Dr Koh: "It is another gamble in Aljunied GRC as it was held by WP by the thinnest of margins (in 2015). But we also recognise that this may be in good part because of the controversy about the financial management of the town council there."

She added: "But I am sure that Mr Low will continue to be in the wings as a mentor ready to be tapped by the younger set of WP leaders."

## **THE AHTC FACTOR**

In an interview with CNA, Mr Low denied that a civil lawsuit against the WP leaders over the mismanagement of funds at Aljunied-Hougang Town Council was one of the factors that led to his decision to step down, but some analysts thought it may have had a part to play.

Mr Low, Ms Lim, and to a lesser extent, Mr Singh, were found liable last October in the landmark case involving S\$33.7 million of town council funds, in the first tranche of a trial that began in 2017.

In a written judgment, High Court judge Kannan Ramesh said that Ms Lim and Mr Low had breached their fiduciary duties, failed to act in AHTC's best interests and questioned their integrity. WP has appealed against the ruling and the result of the appeal is pending.

Assoc Prof Tan said: "It's a tacit recognition that he is taking responsibility for the party falling short in the running of AHTC, which occurred while he was still the party chief."

Dr Tan of SIM Global Education had a different view and reckoned that the step-down was in line with Mr Low's earlier commitment to pass the baton to the party's younger leaders.

In a press conference on Friday, Mr Singh said that there have not been any major issues with the management of the town council since 2015.

"If you look at the financial performance, for example, it's comparable to any other GRC in Singapore. I think more importantly residents ... and town councillors have all worked together to deliver good outcomes to residents," he said in response to reporters' questions.

But political observers agreed on one thing - the long-running town council issue may not sway voters.

"The AHTC issue is long-running and has been in the news for several years now," said Assoc Prof Tan. "Voters would, by now, have made up their minds on WP's handling of the matter and whether to support the WP or not.

"The AHTC saga, so far, has not revealed any criminal wrongdoing, which would otherwise be politically fatal for the WP."

## **WHAT ELSE MAY SWAY VOTERS**

While they think the saga could emerge as part of PAP's campaign in Aljunied, political observers said it should be a "minor feature".

"It's not a new issue and there is fatigue among residents over the issue and barbs exchanged between the PAP and WP over the years," said Assoc Prof Tan.

Dr Tan from SIM Global Education said: "If the PAP could exploit this matter to their advantage, they would do so - as will any other political parties.

“However, one thing the PAP should also understand is that voters' behaviour has changed as well and sentiments on the ground might not tolerate such bullying tactics ... Blatantly exploiting this matter can have unintended repercussions and might even backfire.”

According to the PAP's Aljunied constituency website, its line-up includes three familiar faces who ran as part of the ruling party's five-member team in Aljunied during the 2015 General Election - Mr Shamsul Kamar, Mr Victor Lye and Mr Chua Eng Leong.

The other two are newcomers - 41-year-old lawyer Alex Yeo and Chan Hui Yuh, 44, both of whom chair PAP branch divisions in Aljunied.

Ultimately, the voters in Aljunied and Hougang will not be focused on just their constituencies, given that the only elected opposition MPs in the last two sessions of Parliament were WP representatives from those wards, according to Assoc Prof Tan.

“What's on the minds of voters in Aljunied and Hougang in the upcoming GE is the future of the opposition in Singapore's one-party dominant system ... Will voters be prepared to support the WP as it undergoes a massive transition away from the Low era?” he said.