

GE2020: New Sengkang GRC likely to see keen contest between PAP and WP, say political observers

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The race for the new four-member Sengkang GRC will likely see a strong contest between the People's Action Party (PAP) and the Workers' Party (WP), political observers say.

The WP will "almost certainly" challenge the PAP there, said former Nominated Member of Parliament Eugene Tan, who added further: "Will one of the Aljunied GRC MPs lead the WP team there? Regardless, the WP will give the PAP a run for its money."

The new Sengkang GRC, which will have more than 117,000 voters, is made up of the former single seats of Sengkang West and Punggol East, as well as a part of Pasir-Ris Punggol GRC.

In the 2015 General Election, the PAP's Charles Chong narrowly won Punggol East with 51.8 per cent of the votes against the WP's Lee Li Lian.

The PAP's share of the vote in Sengkang West, 62.1 per cent, was also below the party's national average of 69.9 per cent in 2015, Assoc Prof Tan noted.

He added that Sengkang has a younger demographic - voters predominantly in their 20s to 40s who may not be so "wedded" to the PAP, unlike the older generation.

"It's also a new GRC and so the advantage of incumbency is somewhat reduced," he said.

Associate Professor Bilveer Singh from the political science department at the National University of Singapore (NUS) echoed the same view, pointing to the WP's "geographical strategy", which is not constituency-centric.

Sengkang West, Punggol East, Hougang and Aljunied are areas where the WP holds "strong appeal", he said. The WP is incumbent in Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC.

"Even if Ng Chee Meng stands there as a major minister, or anyone else, I think it's not going to be easy going," said Assoc Prof Singh amid speculation that Mr Ng, who is currently a Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP, could contest in Sengkang GRC.

A strong fight can be expected if WP also deploys at least one known name in Sengkang GRC, said Mr Leonard Lim, country director of Singapore at government affairs and public policy consultancy Vriens & Partners. He cited former Non-Constituency Member of Parliament Gerald Giam and former Punggol East MP Lee Li Lian as examples.

Mr Lim added that as a former MP for Sengkang West, Senior Minister of State for Transport Dr Lam Pin Min may be a target for the opposition over the ban on personal mobility devices on footpaths last year. The incident led to "quite a lot" of unhappiness and online discussion, Mr Lim said.

In the Punggol East ward, which the PAP lost in a 2013 by-election but won back in 2015, veteran MP Charles Chong is expected to retire.

It will be a big loss for the PAP if the seven-term MP does not run again, said Mr Lim.

Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP Teo Ser Luck, whose ward moves to the new Sengkang GRC, is another familiar face to residents and there are rumours that he may also retire from politics, Mr Lim added.

“The PAP may be fielding a combination of an MP from another ward and a new face here as a result, and if there is no heavyweight candidate or current minister to anchor the team, the WP will certainly fancy its chances,” he told CNA.

CHALLENGES WP COULD FACE

Another observer, former PAP MP Inderjit Singh, suggested that Sengkang's younger demographic could work in the ruling party's favour.

“PAP will have an upper hand because of the demography of this area – young families who want stability of government,” he suggested.

Still, it would be an “interesting and tough battleground”, he added. “We can expect the PAP to send a strong minister to helm this, so we are likely to see changes on who the candidates will be.”

For one observer, the WP could find it more challenging to form a team for the four-member constituency, compared to the PAP.

“So, while it would seem that it's fair game for all, carving out Sengkang GRC could be seen to be something that the ruling party would necessarily benefit greatly from,” said associate lecturer at SIM Global Education Felix Tan.

He added that it has always been easier for an opposition party to win a single-seat constituency than a GRC, as the opposition usually finds it difficult to field a strong slate of candidates needed to run in a GRC.

“Absorbing the single seats of Sengkang West and Punggol East into the new Sengkang GRC does dilute the proportion of likely voters for the opposition, and also requires the opposition to invest much more resources in campaigning, ground coordination and outreach than they would need if they had contested in single seats,” Dr Tan said.

He noted, however, that past results show the WP has also been able to make "significant in-roads" into the GRC system.

While tackling new areas, the WP will also face the dilemma of investing resources in new wards while working hard to retain Aljunied GRC, said political analyst Mustafa Izzuddin.

“As an experienced political party, the WP knows that they cannot take it for granted Aljunied GRC will be a shoo-in for them. So they will palpably put a lot of effort into making sure to retain Aljunied, an uppermost political priority for them,” he said.

Mr Lim from Vriens & Partners said that the appeal of the WP could have dulled in certain areas.

He noted that in the 2013 Punggol East by-election, the lack of childcare facilities was cited as one of the reasons for the PAP's loss to Ms Lee Li Lian.

“Since then, the Government has built more of such infrastructure and integrated the various developments in the area more. The PAP team will point to its track record in this area, making the WP’s goal of winning Sengkang GRC harder,” he said.

The WP would also need to quickly get up to speed and walk the ground in the other half of Sengkang GRC, Mr Lim said.

“That will be made all the harder given the likely campaigning challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak,” he added.

OTHER PARTIES MAY JOIN THE FRAY

While the fight in Sengkang GRC looks set to be between the PAP and WP, observers said that other parties may join the contest.

In March, after the formation of the new GRC was announced by the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee, former Sengkang West MP Dr Lam said:

"As a new GRC, I would expect fierce competition from the opposition parties. But whoever the opposition team may be, we will do our best and let Singaporeans decide based on our track record of service to our fellow citizens."

SIM Global Education's Dr Tan said there is always a possibility that there will be other political parties who will enter the fray if they are able to field strong, competent and capable candidates.

"I would not be the least surprised if we have competition from Tan Cheng Bock's Progress Singapore Party (PSP) since it has garnered quite a reputation in recent months. Not only is PSP new, but it can also rest on the Tan Cheng Bock 'cult of personality,'" he said.

Deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies Gillian Koh said that the new Sengkang GRC may be the subject of a “tussle” between WP and the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA).

This is because the constituency incorporates the current Sengkang West and Punggol East SMCs contested by the WP in 2015, and the SDA contested in Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC in the 2015 General Election.

“The boundary change sets up a fight between the two, especially since SDA, in rejecting collaboration with other opposition parties, may not have the resources to expand its reach well beyond the region,” Dr Koh said.

However, others felt that the chances of other parties joining the fight in Sengkang GRC are low. WP should have some "goodwill" based on past efforts in this area so other parties may yield to the WP for this GRC, Mr Singh said.

Mr Lim said that while he does not expect major opposition parties like the Singapore Democratic Party to contest there, one of the smaller parties may field a team.

“They would not be expected to pose any sort of electoral challenge given that they have not been on the ground much there,” he said.