

GE2020: PAP faces tough test from Tan Cheng Bock's PSP in battle for West Coast GRC, say analysts

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The People's Action Party's (PAP) firm grip on West Coast Group Representation Constituency (GRC) will be tested by the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) in the upcoming General Election, analysts say.

West Coast GRC has traditionally been a PAP stronghold since it was formed in 1997. In the last polls in 2015, PAP won 78.57 per cent of the votes against the Reform Party (RP).

The wide margin meant that the four-member PAP team, which comprised of Mr S Iswaran, Mr Lim Hng Kiang, Ms Foo Mee Har and Mr Patrick Tay, was among the best performing PAP teams in the 2015 General Election.

Although the PAP remains favourite to retain the ward according to observers, new challengers PSP, led by veteran politician Dr Tan Cheng Bock, could make it a much tighter affair.

"The support for the PAP will probably remain quite decent even in the face of a strong challenger. There is a high chance that the PSP, led by Dr Tan Cheng Bock, will make serious in-roads into this constituency, although short of taking over," said associate lecturer at SIM Global Education Felix Tan.

Dr Tan was MP for Ayer Rajah for 26 years when he was with the PAP. The ward is now part of West Coast GRC.

He believes that his strong roots in the area, from his time serving as an MP and a medical doctor, will help PSP gain an advantage in the contest.

TAN CHENG BOCK A "SEASONED CAMPAIGNER"

According to Dr Gillian Koh, research deputy director for the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Dr Tan's experience as a former PAP politician would put him in good stead in the minds of voters in the area.

"People and voters especially in the region will feel that it is the PSP that is the party to watch, not just because it is a newcomer, but most importantly because it is helmed by Dr Tan, who was a party stalwart of the PAP for so many years," said Dr Koh.

She noted that besides his experience as a PAP MP in Ayer Rajah, Dr Tan contested in the Presidential Election in 2011, where he lost marginally to Dr Tony Tan.

"He is a seasoned campaigner ... at his party's press conference, he was campaigning to be given a chance to bring issues of governance in Singapore," said Dr Koh.

"The PAP has always prided itself on delivering good governance so for someone from its camp formerly, setting up an opposition party indicates that Dr Tan feels that there is a deficit he wants to fix," she added.

National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser told CNA that he anticipates the contest for West Coast GRC to be a “battle royal” between PAP and PSP.

He highlighted that Dr Tan’s experience in Ayer Rajah means that the PSP team has some “home-ground advantage and political capital” but also outlined that voters might regard him differently now that he is no longer with the PAP.

“He is no longer under the PAP banner, which means that if the GRC voters decide who to vote on the basis of the party a candidate comes under, then Dr Tan would be at a disadvantage,” said Assoc Prof Tan.

“HEAVYWEIGHT” NAME LIKELY TO JOIN PAP SLATE

Analysts said that the final candidate line-ups for West Coast GRC will be one to look out for on Nomination Day next Tuesday, with the number of seats expanded from four to five.

The Electoral Boundaries Review Committee report released in March showed that West Coast GRC took in parts of Chua Chu Kang GRC and parts of Hong Kah North Single Member Constituency (SMC) to become a five-member constituency, with 144,516 voters, up from 99,300 in 2015.

Observers said that PAP would likely field a refreshed slate for West Coast GRC, including some familiar faces.

For instance, Mr Lim Hng Kiang, who left his portfolio in Cabinet in May 2018 as Minister of Trade and Industry, will likely stand down for the upcoming election.

IPS' Dr Koh said it could be possible that PAP would name a strong, experienced candidate to stand alongside Mr Iswaran, Mr Tay and Ms Foo, with the GRC likely to be a key election battleground.

“We wait to see which other heavyweight candidate will be sent to complement Mr S Iswaran in this fight in the west, now that it is clear the PSP team they will be up against,” she said.

“Mr Tay, Ms Foo have been on the ground for many years and they, like Mr Iswaran, are most likely to stay in order to retain the political capital they have. It is just a question of the top up of two new candidates for the ward,” Dr Koh added.

PSP’S “FORMIDABLE” TEAM A

PSP announced on Friday morning that the potential candidates it will field in West Coast GRC alongside Dr Tan are Ms Hazel Poa, a former government scholarship holder who was a star catch for the National Solidarity Party in 2011, PSP assistant secretary-general Leong Mun Wai who is a former managing director at OCBC Securities, former Singapore Armed Forces lieutenant colonel Nadarajah Loganathan and marketing executive Jeffrey Khoo.

NUS’ Assoc Prof Tan said that this will likely be PSP’s “Team A” and the quality of candidates who might stand alongside Dr Tan indicates that PSP would not be seen as a “one-person show”.

Dr Felix Tan shared similar sentiments. He noted that the potential candidates that PSP is likely to field in West Coast GRC is a “rather formidable team”.

Dr Felix Tan noted that PSP as a collective unit has a strong slate of candidates, consisting of former PAP members and grassroots leaders who have experience in running town councils.

He added that this suits voters who are looking for an alternative voice, but prefer a party that does not deviate too much from the PAP.

“PSP would seem to fit that bill perfectly. It would now boil down to what the PSP can promise and whether their goals will be realistic and pragmatic enough,” he said.

PSP has unveiled 24 potential candidates for the election, and has announced that it intends to contest West Coast, Chua Chu Kang, Nee Soon and Tanjong Pagar GRCs as well as Kebun Baru, Yio Chu Kang, Marymount, Pioneer and Hong Kah North SMCs.

Dr Felix Tan noted that although PSP has candidates with impressive credentials, the COVID-19 measures announced by the Election Department - which include no physical rallies and no party walkabouts in groups of more than five - could be a handicap for newcomers like PSP, as voters may be unfamiliar with the candidates.

“Unfortunately, given the limitations to election campaigning and the timing of the elections this time around, one wonders whether the voters really have the time to take notice of the candidates' portfolio or simply fall back on the 'tried and tested' party that they are familiar with,” said Dr Felix Tan.

“The PSP will have an uphill task to push for their candidates in a GRC more so and hence, given the circumstances, the PSP will have not much of a choice but to rely on the cult of personality that revolves around Dr Tan Cheng Bock,” he added.

3-CORNERED FIGHT STILL ON THE CARDS?

Observers told CNA that if the battle for West Coast GRC becomes a three-cornered fight, PSP's chances of mounting a real challenge to PAP will be diminished as the votes for the opposition parties could be split.

On Tuesday, the Reform Party (RP) announced that it would not contest West Coast GRC, paving the way for a head-to-head fight between PAP and PSP.

RP secretary-general Kenneth Jeyaretnam said that the party decided to give West Coast GRC a miss after “long talks” with Dr Tan and assistant secretary-general Mr Leong.

However, on Thursday night, RP chairman Andy Zhu accused PSP of not honouring a “gentleman's agreement” between the two sides, with PSP is set to contest Yio Chu Kang SMC, a ward where RP secretary-general Kenneth Jeyaratnem is expected to contest.

The ward was carved out from Ang Mo Kio GRC, which RP contested in 2015. Mr Zhu claimed that the rights to contest there should be awarded to RP.

Dr Tan announced on Friday morning that chartered accountant Ms Kayla Low would potentially contest Yio Chu Kang SMC for PSP.

In response to RP's claim, PSP's Mr Leong said on Friday that he had been in direct contact with Mr Jeyaretnam and there was an exchange of ideas. However, he pointed out that the two parties never arrived or agreed to any formal agreement.

Mr Leong said he would apologise to RP if there was any misunderstanding but he maintained that the party takes a "serious view" towards anyone who attacked the integrity of Dr Tan.

Observers said that these recent developments could mean that all bets are off between RP and PSP, and this could eventually lead to a three-corner fight in West Coast GRC.

Dr Felix Tan said that RP comprises largely of "unknown individuals with little experience in the political landscape", and that their inclusion could have little impact on the result on Polling Day.

"RP might get a small percentage of the vote share, but their attempts would be futile, especially against two political parties led by strong personalities and political acumen," said Dr Felix Tan.

Dr Koh maintained that all eyes would be on PSP to provide the arguments, and the PAP incumbent team to respond.

But she stated that PAP's senior leaders would also put their weight behind their West Coast GRC team during the course of campaigning.

"In other words, this battle may feel less of a local one and more of a national one," said Dr Koh.