

GE2020: SPP has 'uphill battle' in Potong Pasir, but has done well in outreach, analysts say

Lydia Lim & Rachel Phua

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The Singapore People's Party (SPP), contesting for the first time without the Chiam's presence, faces an uphill battle in Potong Pasir SMC but has done well in its outreach, analysts say.

SPP chairman Jose Raymond will be the party's representative in Potong Pasir this year, in a bid to wrest it back into opposition hands - the area was lost to the People's Action Party's (PAP) Sitoh Yih Pin in 2011, who increased his vote share in the next round of polls four years later.

Before 2011, the Single Member Constituency (SMC) had been held by Mr Chiam for 27 years under different party colours, when he was in the Singapore Democratic Party, Singapore Democratic Alliance and SPP. He became a Member of Parliament (MP) of Potong Pasir in 1984 and served six terms, becoming one of Singapore's longest-serving opposition MPs.

Political observer and law professor Eugene Tan said Mr Raymond will have his work "cut out for him" in his first electoral outing.

"PAP's Sitoh Yih Pin is quite secure in Potong Pasir," said Associate Professor Tan. "The Chiam effect in Potong Pasir is weakening with every General Election."

He added that the enlargement of the ward to include parts of the new Bidadari housing estate may mean that younger voters are not as "clued in" to Potong Pasir's past as an opposition ward.

Deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies Gillian Koh pointed to the results in previous elections: Mr Chiam's wife, Lina Chiam, lost to PAP's Mr Sitoh with 49.64 per cent of the votes in 2011, and her margin diminished further to 33.59 per cent against Mr Sitoh in 2015.

"(This suggests) that there is less and less likelihood that the SPP would be able to wrest the ward back from the PAP," she said.

"AN UPHILL CLIMB"

Ms Nydia Ngiow, senior director of public policy consultancy BowerGroupAsia, similarly added that "it will be an uphill climb for SPP".

"Residents in Potong Pasir saw several estate upgrades in the past nine years and SPP will have to convince residents that they will be able to successfully provide the same," she said.

"The contrast in experience is stark: While he has an illustrious resume, this is (Mr Raymond's) first electoral outing against a battle-hardened two-term incumbent who has been walking the grounds at Potong Pasir for over 20 years."

Assoc Prof Tan said "it's an uphill battle for SPP", but added that SPP is in a post-Chiam era and "should seek to demonstrate that the current leaders are worthy of Chiam's legacy".

SPP HAS BEEN MAKING GOOD HEADWAY

However, the political observers pointed out that SPP's leaders have been making good headway connecting with residents in the constituencies it plans to contest in.

Dr Koh noted that Mr Raymond, who will contest for the Potong Pasir SMC seat, has been walking the ground in the area over the past three years, demonstrating his commitment to the community there.

“How much this will eventually translate into votes will really depend on how aggressively he can table his policies to the residents there,” SIM Global Education associate lecturer Felix Tan, who also commended Mr Raymond's efforts, said.

Agreeing, Ms Ngiow said Mr Raymond joined the party only in 2017 but has “built a formidable reputation in the neighbourhood within the past three years”.

“While the current leaders are fairly new to the party, both Jose Raymond and Steve Chia are closely tied to the Chiams and possess substantive experience as well as knowledge of the existing government structure in comparison to the other smaller parties,” she added.

SPP is also contesting in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC with a team helmed by secretary-general Steve Chia.

Mr Chia, who succeeded Mr Chiam as the party's secretary-general last November, was previously a member of the National Solidarity Party from 1995 to 2018, and a Non-Constituency Member of Parliament from 2002 to 2006.

And while his team members are relatively new to the party and the constituency, they are not novices to elections, Dr Koh said, adding that Mr Chia is also a veteran politician. Osman Sulaiman ran in two elections under the Reform Party's banner and Melvyn Chiu contested in the 2015 election as a Singapore First party member.

THE CHIAM FACTOR AND SITO H YIH PIN'S PROGRESS

The analysts pointed out that SPP has to contend with both Mr Chiam's legacy and Mr Sitoh's work in Potong Pasir.

“Chiam See Tong is a legend in Potong Pasir and his absence has already been strongly felt in all quarters in Potong Pasir,” said Dr Felix Tan.

“There will always be the lingering sentiments in that constituency that without the Chiams actively engaging the ground, there would be little that the current spate of leaders can do to turn the tide in their favour.”

He cited the past results for Bishan-Toa Payoh. In 2011, when Mr Chiam led the team there, SPP had a strong showing although it lost eventually. But in 2015, the vote shares dipped by a much larger margin without the iconic leader in the team.

Ms Ngiow pointed out that voters stayed loyal to Mr Chiam, “but they are practical too”.

“Once he moved to lead the team in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC in 2011, not even his wife could hold on to the seat given all the goodies PAP were dangling,” she said.

She added that Mr Sitoh has been working the ground for the past two decades and cannot be discounted.

“His persistence in staying in the community despite having been defeated twice also played a part in ultimately winning residents over in 2011 which helped to chip away at Mr Chiam’s influence,” she said.

PAP’s return to Potong Pasir has also provided the area with “much-needed amenities and upgrades”, said Dr Felix Tan.

Mr Sitoh’s performance at the polls also improved in 2015, showing that he has listened to his residents and worked to improve the constituency since winning the seat.

“It would be quite a challenge for the SPP to defeat the incumbent as the PAP has probably made full use of the past few years to entrench its influence,” he said.

POSSIBLE VOTER ISSUES

The coming election might also see voters place greater weight on national issues because of both the economic and health crisis caused by COVID-19, said the observers. Voters might be inclined to stick to the status quo during this period.

Like other opposition parties, SPP would need to clearly and effectively convince the voters there that their “alternative” policies are better than what the incumbent has to offer, said Dr Felix Tan, particularly on how to alleviate the impact of the economic fallout.

Other issues that will appeal to voters will be bread-and-butter ones, such as the impending GST hike, education and security, he added. Younger voters may also want to hear their stance on topics like climate change and human rights.

How each party plans to deal with the dengue problem may be another factor as well, added Dr Koh.

The analysts said SPP’s chances in Bishan-Toa Payoh are slim, with Dr Koh adding that the party needs to develop a national profile if it wants to compete against the “well-established” PAP members overseeing Bishan-Toa Payoh.

POTONG PASIR RESIDENTS SHARE THEIR VIEWS

Potong Pasir residents that CNA spoke to largely spoke well of Mr Chiam, but also of Mr Sitoh, pointing to the upgrades in the estate. Several also knew of Mr Raymond and had seen him walking the ground.

Voter Tan Huey Ying, 30, who grew up in Sennett Estate, said that Mr Chiam is still a legend in her eyes.

She takes a “certain pride” in coming from a ward that was served by the longest-serving opposition member in Parliament. And the estate was always well-maintained and clean.

“Growing up under Chiam See Tong, there were no huge issues,” she said.

However, she acknowledged that after Mr Sitoh took over, Potong Pasir was spruced up. Amenities like sheltered walkways and paved sidewalks were built - and welcomed.

Both Bryan Chiang, 24, and Sim Kwee Hock, 54, who lived in Potong Pasir for the last 15 and 19 years respectively, also attested to how new infrastructure sprung up with the change in MP in 2011.

But Mr Chiang said that beyond things like gyms and other facilities, he is looking for a candidate that is “people-oriented” as well.

Mr Sim said that beyond municipal issues, he is also concerned about having diverse voices in Parliament.

“You need opposition in Parliament to provide constructive criticism,” he said.

Retiree and former shipping general manager Alvin Fu, 60, said he did not know who exactly was contesting. The Potong Pasir resident of eight years said he has seen Mr Raymond delivering leaflets, but added that he has a “good impression” of Mr Sitoh as he “has done a lot”.

He pointed to the new walkways, the repainting of blocks and fixing of wiring, and said Mr Sitoh has done “a good job”.

Two elderly men sitting at a void deck also spoke well of Mr Sitoh, and only their passing neighbour - a 54-year-old financial controller at a multinational corporation - knew about Mr Raymond.

The man, who gave his name only as Mr Tan, said he has lived in Potong Pasir for 18 years and Mr Sitoh has done “a lot for community upgrading”. However, some concerns he has include the smell of sewage from communal rubbish chutes and occasional unclear water from the taps.

Irene Koh-Lau, 57, who has lived in Upper Thomson – within the Bishan-Toa Payoh constituency – for 23 years, said that Mr Chiam’s association with SPP will not be a factor when she walks into the voting booth.

“Chiam has been away from politics for a long time. His successors also have yet to prove that they were as dedicated as he was,” she said.

The battle ahead for SPP in Potong Pasir and Bishan-Toa Payoh is tough, said Assoc Prof Eugene Tan.

“But the SPP slate will hope, at least, to turn in a performance that could earn them NCMP seats.”