

Who will be the next Workers' Party chief?

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SINGAPORE: A week after his surprise announcement that he will step down as the secretary-general of Workers' Party (WP) by next year, Low Thia Kiang has remained mum about who his likely successor will be.

When asked by reporters at his Meet the People's session on Wednesday (Nov 8), Mr Low would only say it will be up to the party to decide.

While two observers Channel NewsAsia spoke to agreed that Singapore's largest opposition party has no lack of choices, they differed on who the likely front-runners are.

Deciding on the Workers' Party's direction

Perhaps the key lies in the kind of future the WP wants, said Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of the Institute of Policy Studies.

In a commemorative book for the party's 60th anniversary this year, Mr Low said the party is ready to take another step towards its goal of forming an alternative government. This is a departure from Mr Low's declaration after WP's 2013 by-election win in Punggol East, where he said that the party was "not ready" to do so.

"Party members will have to decide what is the direction that the party should go towards," said Dr Koh. "Whether it's more of the same - a sort of modest, but very credible strategy of WP being a check and balance on the PAP - or the one that was announced; that the WP wants to form an alternative government," said Dr Koh.

"From there, I think you can see there are different personalities that have arisen over the years, built up a brand, built up some kind of public profile and I don't think that the WP would want to waste that kind of political mileage and capital that has been built upon these younger players."

For example, Dr Koh pointed out that current Hougang Member of Parliament (MP) Png Eng Huat has a similar grassroots style as Mr Low. While current Non-Constituency MP Leon Perera, and former NCMPs Gerald Giam and Yee Jenn Jong, are seen more as "policy wonks".

Sylvia Lim and Pritam Singh – Likely front-runners?

Associate Professor of Law Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University agreed that younger members could be options, as they have taken on greater responsibilities in the party and have been developing their parliamentary experience.

But he also pointed out they are not as well-known as the party's chairman Sylvia Lim or assistant secretary-general Pritam Singh.

"I would say that the front-runners would be party chairman Sylvia Lim, who is about 10 years younger than Mr Low, and if they want an even younger secretary-general, then they would have Pritam Singh," said Assoc Prof Tan.

"For Pritam, being a non-Chinese, that could also add to the overall appeal," he added. "Particularly when the WP has been very much identified as having, and is very much, a Chinese-based party. It would signal that WP is a party that is able to see beyond race and they would be a leading opposition party to have a non-Chinese as the secretary-general."

However, he pointed out the concern would be that Ms Lim and Mr Singh are both embroiled in a lawsuit involving Aljunied-Hougang Town Council. Together with Mr Low, they have been accused of improper payments amounting to about S\$33 million.

Next party election due by 2018

Mr Low has been at the helm of WP since 2001, taking over the post of secretary-general from Mr JB Jeyaretnam. In the last party election in 2016, Mr Low fended off a challenge for the post from lawyer and fellow Aljunied GRC MP – Chen Show Mao.

But Assoc Prof Tan thinks it should be no surprise if there is no contest at the next party election, which is due by 2018: "We shouldn't be surprised if there's no contest, that the party rank and file is able to agree on a consensus candidate because I think when you have a contest, there's always a possibility of internal strain being generated.

"I think the WP will certainly want to show that they are closing ranks behind the new secretary-general, and Mr Low will certainly take a very active role in trying to develop that consensus, trying to find out the sort of leader the party base believes would be most appropriate to lead the party into the future."