

## People's Action loses Singapore by-election

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Singapore's ruling People's Action party (PAP) lost a landmark by-election on Sunday but improved its showing since a poll in the same district a year ago, bringing some relief a year after suffering its worst national poll result since independence.

The opposition Workers party retained the seat - a stronghold since 1991. The party will maintain its five member tally in the national parliament, with the PAP on 81 seats.

The by-election, in the district of Hougang, was widely seen as a barometer of the PAP's stewardship of Singapore in the past 12 months in which voter concern over rising immigration and rising living costs have persisted since last year's election. Singapore is trying to balance the need for foreign workers amid falling local birth rates with the social impact of immigration.

It came as increasingly active social media in Singapore have helped generate more open discussion of the role of political opposition in the city-state of 5.1m, which has been ruled by the PAP since independence under founder Lee Kuan Yew in 1965.

The PAP won 37.9 per cent of the vote in Hougang, a small district of 23,500 voters, up from 35.2 per cent in the national poll a year ago. Its candidate, a 34-year old former policeman, Desmond Choo, also fought the seat at least year's poll.

As expected, the opposition Workers party retained the seat - a stronghold since 1991. The party will maintain its five member tally in the national parliament, with the PAP on 81 seats. The poll had been triggered by the resignation of Hougang's former sitting MP, who quit amid allegations of an extramarital affair.

While the PAP had played down expectations of its ability to retake the Hougang seat, any deterioration in its support would have been a significant blow at a time when the PAP has been hoping to take credit for a series of reforms implemented since last year's election. The PAP's preferred candidate for the state presidency narrowly scraped victory in a presidential poll only three months after the general election.

Teo Chee Hean, deputy prime minister, said: "We always knew Hougang would be difficult, but we take it seriously and we are glad to see that the voters have shown him [Mr Choo] faith by showing him stronger support."

Low Thia Khiang, the Workers party's secretary-general, hit out at what he called an "unfair and unlevel playing field" between his party and the PAP during the campaign, saying that the "mainstream media" had "become a tool of the PAP".

"I feel disappointed to see in this by-election situations similar to what I experienced in the 1980s and 1990s with several moves to discredit the candidates and Workers party. An independent media is a cornerstone of a first world parliament."

The PAP had sought to frame the election as a purely local issue, while the Workers party campaigned saying that local and national issues could not be seen separately.

Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore, told the local ChannelnewsAsia TV station: "Most of us, as we saw the election, thought it would be difficult to separate the local from the national."