

Popular discontent gives Singapore's outsiders a fighting electoral chance

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Singapore's previous general elections have had much in common with the annual Hungry Ghost Festival.

The festival's fanfare is intended to appease spirits that have been allowed a temporary airing. Singaporeans listen and gawk in earnest and then go home, satisfied that life will go on as normal.

Similarly, during the election's nine-day minimum campaign periods allowed in the constitution, voters attend opposition rallies in throngs, cheer them on, and then on polling day promptly return the People's Action Party (PAP) to power.

Today's elections are being called a watershed, with non-PAP candidates contesting an unprecedented 82 out of the 87 seats. There is no doubt that the PAP will still be in power tomorrow. The big question is whether the opposition can capitalise on recent discontent and gain a substantial say in parliament.

Some say the opposition parties have matured. More professionals and better educated first-timers have stepped up to challenge the government. Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow from the Institute of Policy Studies said the new crop of candidates "make their respective opposition party slates seem more electable".

The sheer willingness of so many candidates to challenge the all-powerful PAP suggests that political conviction is outweighing fear of reprisals this election. The fear factor was a clear inhibiting factor before. Some of those who dared stand against the PAP in the past have been sued and a few have left the country.

By winning a by-election in 1981, lawyer Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam became the first opposition member of parliament since Singapore's independence in 1965. But he was thrown out of parliament after being convicted of misrepresenting party records (a case widely seen as politically motivated) and sued for libel by a series of PAP leaders. He was bankrupted as a result.

Such history does not escape the attention of Nicole Seah, a 24-year-old first-time opposition candidate who is representing the National Solidarity Party.

"Opposition candidates have always fought an uphill battle. Those who fought the good fight have paved a way for us now," Seah said. "The bankrupting and destruction of politicians is a unfortunate consequence of politics anywhere in the world.

"The opposition has thrown up some [candidates with] serious credentials. These are all Singaporean men and women who have chosen to join a political affiliation that society still

considers taboo. And it says a lot about the consequences the implemented policies have brought about in recent years."

Another first-time opposition candidate, Vincent Wijesingha of the Singapore Democratic Party, agreed.

"Those opposition candidates whom the PAP attempted to destroy in the past were treated in this way precisely because of their expertise and credibility," he said.

Workers' Party (WP) veteran Low Thia Khiang, who held one of the two opposition seats in the last parliament, is part of a five-member group taking on a team led by Singapore's incumbent Foreign Minister George Yeo Yong Boon.

One of Low's running mates is Workers' Party chairman, 46-year-old lawyer Sylvia Lim.

"We are doing this because we believe that your lives will improve if the PAP government faces a strong Workers' Party presence in parliament," Lim said.

At the last election, Lim was the losing candidate with the biggest number of votes, an achievement that earned her a place in parliament under a scheme granting limited voting rights but the authority to ask questions. Her party is fielding a total of 23 candidates in all. And, tens of thousands have been flocking to the party's rallies each night.

The opposition has lashed out at the PAP on a range of issues, including the high cost of living, a controversial proposal to send the elderly to Malaysia for more affordable care, the displacement of local workers by foreign talent, and the failure to explain why Singapore's hosting of the 2010 Youth Olympics cost three times the amount budgeted.

Then there are the perennial complaints about high ministerial pay and a stressful education system.

Some 2.35 million Singaporeans are eligible to vote today, compared to the 2.16 million back in 2001, an increase of 9 per cent.

In the present climate of discontent, a surge in new voters, a third of whom are under 35, is likely to favour the opposition.

The SDP's Wijesingha, a 40-year-old with a doctorate in social policy, explained why he decided to get into opposition politics. "Democracy is the last guarantee of the weak against the strong. Information is the oxygen of democracy and debate is its lifeblood. Singapore has neither.

"This has resulted in a community that lets its old people go hungry. Participation in the parliamentary process is the first step to change."

Wijesingha said he was driven by "a sense of outrage that the weakest in our community are protected the least and exploited the most".

Seah, of the NSP, says she grew up supporting the PAP.

"But when I entered university, I learnt that things were not so simple. The rhetoric of the incumbent is that Singapore is doing fine if you stick to their plans. But people are falling through the cracks," she said.

"As a volunteer who helped distribute essential items to low-income households, I learnt that the present government was relying on non-governmental organisations to feed the poor and treat the symptoms. And if they are not going to change the situation from the inside, we just have to bring on the fight from the outside."

Kenneth Jeyaretnam, secretary general of the Reform Party and son of J.B. Jeyaretnam, said he was running because he wanted Singapore to take its place as a democratic country in the first world. He is also motivated by his father's death in September 2008, just three months after setting up the Reform Party. Jeyaretnam said that while his father championed political reform, he wanted to go further and make changes to the economic structure so that policies favoured individuals more. He said competition in politics would lead to better and more intelligent policies.

A Cambridge University economics graduate with double first-class honours, Jeyaretnam said he was better qualified as an economist than most in the present government. Seah, the youngest opposition candidate, saw the aggressive campaigning of the opposition parties as "an all-or-nothing gamble".

"The final result could be 87-0. Singaporeans have to carefully think through what they want," she said.

"If they want a voice, they will get one because they can vote for it. If they want a stronger voice, they can choose that as well."