

BATTLEGROUND HOLLAND-BUKIT TIMAH: Fight in 'rich man's GRC' heats up

Strong opposition team, well-heeled voters could mean a close contest

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The Straits Times, 6 May 2011

Heart or mind? That is what this election boils down to for Ms Sabrina Tay, 27.

On the one hand, the People's Action Party (PAP) takes the crown when it comes to track record, says the health-care consultant who lives in Sixth Avenue in the prime District 10.

But on the other hand, Ms Tay, who describes herself as a young voter with a 'liberal bent', feels there should be a larger opposition voice in local politics.

And to her, the team from the opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) appears 'quite credible'.

'There are pros and cons to both sides so I could go either way,' she concludes.

Tipped as a shoo-in for the PAP just a few weeks ago, the fight for Holland-Bukit Timah GRC - dubbed the 'rich man's GRC' - has heated up significantly.

Analysts who spoke to The Straits Times rank the constituency, helmed by Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan, as one of the hottest GRCs being contested, the others being Aljunied and Bishan-Toa Payoh.

The contest may turn out to be closer than expected because of a confluence of factors, they point out.

First, the constituency has a significant proportion of upper-class voters - around a third live in private property - who tend to identify more with high-minded ideals like the need for alternative voices in politics.

Second, a strong opposition line-up from the SDP which has come up with fairly detailed alternative policy proposals.

And there is the big unknown factor: The GRC has not been contested since it was formed in 2001. There is no telling how the ground may have shifted.

'Rich' grounds for opposition support?

The area is home to some of Singapore's most well-heeled, for whom hot-button issues such as the cost of living or HDB prices may not hold much sway.

Says Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh: 'People in this constituency are probably going to be concerned about the bigger picture in terms of economic strategy.'

'SDP has tried to persuade the voters by presenting its economic strategy.'

Voters from the higher social economic class are also generally more likely to value political pluralism, she adds. Hence, the SDP or whoever might have been the alternative party would have likely drawn interest.

'It makes it a place where there's going to be a tough choice for voters.'

Could these factors contribute to the 'unsettled' mood among Singaporeans that Dr Balakrishnan alluded to in his rally speech on Wednesday?

In an interview with The Straits Times ahead of that speech on Tuesday, the minister cuts a calm figure.

If the pressure of a fortnight of intense campaigning was meant to crack him, it certainly does not show.

Asked about the theory that the opposition may appeal to the more well-off voters, he says it is an untested 'hypothesis'.

Yet the PAP, fully aware that the SDP has courted this segment of voters, has come out strongly in the final lap of the hustings to attack the SDP for its 'middle-class unfriendly' policies.

'If you had to choose between the opposition parties who would be the most middle-class unfriendly of them, (the SDP) would certainly be in that shortlist,' says Dr Balakrishnan, pointing to proposals to raise income taxes and the goods and services tax for luxury items, among others.

A more 'electable' SDP?

On the flip side, the SDP believes its image has changed and voters are now less afraid to show their support for it.

Led by Dr Vincent Wijesingha, 41, a civil society activist, the SDP has trotted out psychiatrist and former army colonel Ang Yong Guan, 56, and private school teacher and former civil servant Michelle Lee, 35. Mr Tan Jee Say, 57, a former high-flying civil servant, completes the slate.

On a recent walkabout, the SDP candidates settle down for an early lunch at a hawker centre when a lady in her 20s, dressed in jeans and a white blouse, walks up to Mr Tan, shakes his hand and thanks him for giving her the chance to vote.

'My whole family of five will be casting their votes for you,' she says, before pumping her fists into the air.

Such voters might have previously written off the party completely, put off by its party chief Chee Soon Juan and his form of firebrand politics.

But although they are willing to give the SDP a chance, analysts say this group of voters is also quite discerning and can be difficult to convince.

Lecturer Gan Su-lin, 44, for example, feels she does not 'need the opposition to critique the PAP because she is capable of doing that herself'.

It is also clear that some voters still do not trust the party's leader, Dr Chee, even though the SDP has widely advertised its less confrontational image.

'I am voting for the PAP because I don't trust SDP as long as Chee is in it. Period,' says a resident in his late 30s, who does not want to be named.

The heartland factor

The name of the GRC may conjure images of landed homes in some of Singapore's most exclusive residential enclaves, but many forget that most of the residents are still heartlanders living in HDB estates like Ghim Moh and Bukit Panjang.

It is Saturday afternoon and Dr Balakrishnan is on a marathon round of block visits. The former eye specialist has picked up a smattering of Hokkien and Teochew to better connect with older Chinese-speaking residents.

He feels the SDP may have neglected courting this crucial group with plans at the local level.

'Perhaps they know - in the words of our residents - we are doing a good job... You have to settle your local ground first then go beyond. If you can't look after your local ground you are at a severe disadvantage,' he says.

The SDP's team counters this perception, telling The Straits Times that it has been visiting HDB wards almost every day, and raising bread-and-butter issues at its rallies daily.

Says Dr Wijesingha: 'Everyone is affected by the cost of living, even the middle class, it's a big issue for everyone.'

Former Nominated Member of Parliament Siew Kum Hong believes that winning over these heartland voters, who make up more than 70 per cent of the electorate in the GRC, will be a key factor.

He warns that while HDB dwellers do not necessarily identify with the PAP, they may not react very much to abstract concepts like democracy and the need for an opposition presence in Parliament.

The big unknown

As the GRC has not faced a contest since it was formed a decade ago, it is difficult to look at history to divine how the contest will go.

Given a potentially large number of swing voters, the PAP team is determined to put up a strong fight, say party sources.

Last night, it distributed letters to residents which contain the party's pledges to address housing and inflation woes over the next term.

One factor that could become significant is the YouTube video highlighted last week by Dr Balakrishnan. The video shows Dr Wijesingha participating in a forum discussing gay issues.

The PAP team has said that this raises questions about Dr Wijesingha's motivations and asked the SDP to state its stand on gay rights.

The SDP has denied having a gay agenda and called the move a 'smear tactic'. The issue seems to have died down, but analysts wonder about its impact. Some believe the issue will help to secure the more morally conservative voters for the PAP, while others say it has left a bad taste in the mouth for younger voters.

So how will it all play out?

'We should always assume that the contest will be hot. But we have been greatly encouraged by the reaction from the ground,' says Dr Balakrishnan, adding that he believes the substantive upgrading projects done in both HDB and private estates in the GRC have established the PAP's credibility with voters.

But he does not want to pre-judge the outcome of the contest. 'As a surgeon, I do not do the post-mortem on a living patient.'

Dr Wijesingha believes the SDP can win the GRC. 'We have a straight shot at it, I believe so,' he tells The Straits Times.

'What is important is that we will be here, whether we win or not, come next election to let people have a choice. We are committed.'