

## **GE2015: Contests expected in all 89 seats today**

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First time since S'pore's independence in 1965 that PAP has such a fight on its hands

Parliamentary hopefuls from nine political parties head to nine nomination centres islandwide today to register for the General Election.

In the past, the hour-long process - from 11am to noon - has thrown up surprises from last-minute candidate switches to withdrawals, objections and disqualifications.

But political watchers expect Nomination Day this year to be relatively quiet, with the action, if any, centred on a few single-member constituencies (SMCs).

This is unlike in 2011, when Workers' Party (WP) chief Low Thia Kiang caused a sensation by leaving Hougang SMC to lead a team that took on the People's Action Party (PAP) in Aljunied GRC.

Whatever happens, today's proceedings are likely to set new benchmarks in Singapore elections.

Contests are expected in all 89 seats and if this comes to pass, it will be for the first time since 1965. As recently as 2001, the ruling PAP was still returned to power on Nomination Day after enjoying walk-overs for a majority of seats.

This year will see the highest number of parties contesting. If all those on the PAP and opposition slates file their papers, there will be a record 178 candidates at the Sept 11 election. If any independents show up, there may be even more.

It is also the first time that the PAP has unveiled its entire slate for every group representation constituency (GRC) and SMC in advance of Nomination Day. This helped set the battle lines early and, barring tactical switches, it has eliminated some of the sense of surprise today.

Another reason why today might be uneventful is that the WP, arguably the party most able to wrest more seats from the PAP, might aim to protect its seven seats and not expand aggressively, analysts say.

Back in 2011, Mr Low engaged in a high-stakes gamble to make the breakthrough in a GRC, said Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

"But this time around, are the stakes that high and does the WP have a fresh ambition to achieve a new water mark?" she asked.

The controversy over management of funds in the WP-run Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC) is also a factor.

"The AHPETC matter does tie the current team down to Aljunied as they may want to take responsibility for anything else that might arise from their time handling the town council between GE2011 and GE2015," said Dr Koh. "If there are any legal actions that might arise

from that, I suppose the team there would want to see those through. It is also not quite fair to place that burden on any other fresh faces."

If no WP heavyweight moves to a new constituency, the action may be focused instead on the 13 SMCs where the opposition may have the best chance of unseating PAP incumbents, especially in straight fights.

Many expect the keenest contests in Fengshan and Sengkang West. Some believe the PAP could switch candidates at the last minute, depending on who the WP fields. Analysts are also watching East Coast GRC, where the WP is expected to send a strong team to take on the PAP, and Punggol East SMC, where PAP veteran Charles Chong hopes to unseat WP's Lee Li Lian.

This could mean lively action and some surprises in two centres - Raffles Institution, where candidates for Aljunied, Ang Mo Kio and Bishan-Toa Payoh GRCs and Sengkang West SMC will file papers, and Fengshan Primary School (East Coast and Pasir Ris-Punggol GRCs and Fengshan and Punggol East SMCs).

Also worth watching will be the Singapore People's Party's challenge in Potong Pasir, where it lost to the PAP by a margin of just 114 votes in 2011, and in Mountbatten.

"The posters and flags were ready long ago," said Mr Chua Lai Teck, branch secretary of the PAP's Moulmein ward in Tanjong Pagar GRC, which may see its first contest since 1988. "As soon as we're sure there's a contest, the posters will go up."