

High stakes, so will WP or SDP budge?

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The posturing by the Workers' Party (WP) and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) over Punggol East shows that both parties have high stakes in the coming polls, say observers.

The by-election could give the SDP a chance to raise its profile while testing the WP's strength, they noted yesterday.

That is why, they said, the WP seems intent on resisting attempts to negotiate with the SDP and others - as the best-scoring opposition party in Punggol East at the 2011 General Election, it sees the ward as its territory.

"They would assume that they deserve exclusivity since they ran a fairly good campaign and got 41 per cent of votes," noted political analyst Lam Peng Er.

Indeed, the by-election might be seen as a test of the WP's status as the dominant party within the opposition. That was achieved at the last GE, "but they are seeking to maintain it", said former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong.

So the WP might even welcome a three-cornered fight, as it would get a chance to establish its superiority over major contenders like the SDP once and for all, observed former National Solidarity Party secretary-general Goh Meng Seng.

"If they succeed, it will open the way for them to muscle into SDP territory more boldly at the next general election," he added.

As for the SDP, it probably sees this election as a rare opportunity to raise its profile and get its proposals onto a national platform.

Dr Chee Soon Juan's party has been pitching itself as the only one with comprehensive alternative policies to challenge the Government's.

It has released detailed plans on health care and housing which have earned it a following online, but running in the by-election could extend its influence to a much wider segment of the population offline, said Dr Lam.

So what would it take to break the deadlock and avoid a multi-cornered fight? Analysts point to two possible solutions.

The first involves one side offering the other a quid pro quo.

The WP, for instance, could agree not to contest, at the next general election, wards that were previously contested by the SDP.

The SDP, however, may not be able to do the same, noted political scientist Reuben Wong, as its brand is not as strong and would not pose a similar threat to WP.

The second solution is to come to an agreement on fielding the better candidate.

But parties might not agree on who is "better" and what the deciding criteria - like paper qualifications or career accomplishments - should be, said opposition veteran Wong Wee Nam.

Different parties may also want to put different types of men or women into Parliament.

Those not yet in the House - like SDP - would want a candidate who is both "a good local mobiliser as well as someone who can carry a discussion at the national level", said Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies.

But those that have sitting MPs - like WP - may prefer "someone whom the ground can identify with", she added.

As tension mounts with the nearing of Nomination Day, cool, rational calculations will not be the only factor. Said Dr Lam: "I won't rule out an agreement not happening, due to ego and pride."