

HOW THE BATTLE WILL SHAPE UP - BATTLEGROUND; Number of candidates matters

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The Straits Times, 10 January 2013

Will it be a multi-cornered fight in Punggol East that hands a victory to the People's Action Party on a silver platter? Or will it come down to the wire in a straight fight between Singapore's two biggest political parties? Political observers told The Straits Times yesterday that the number of candidates could significantly influence the outcome of the by-election.

Scenario 1: No multi-cornered fight

As many as five parties and an independent candidate have declared a keenness to throw their hats in the ring.

Besides the People's Action Party (PAP), they are the Workers' Party (WP), Reform Party, Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) and former Singapore People's Party member Benjamin Pwee.

But political commentator and Singapore Management University (SMU) law lecturer Eugene Tan foresees a straight fight come Nomination Day. "Over the next few days, we'll see a fair bit of posturing. The opposition parties are alive to the fact that a multi-cornered fight will hand victory to the PAP. And many of them will stand to lose their election deposits," he said. Losers who fail to get 12.5 per cent of votes cast forfeit their \$14,500 deposits.

Mr Tan expects them to extract concessions from each other in carving out territory for the next general election, in return for pulling out and leaving just one standing to fight the PAP.

Scenario 2: Probable three-cornered fight

Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamed believes a three-cornered fight is very likely, with each party taking a different stance.

"SDP will posture as an alternative opposition. And WP being the incumbent opposition party, may play a more localised strategy," he said. "They always say a straight fight is better for the opposition. So a three-cornered fight may favour the PAP. But at the same time, voters are savvy and understand what they want in a candidate," he added.

Veteran MP Charles Chong, of single-seat Joo Chiat, however, sees a two-horse race even in a three-cornered fight. "I suspect that residents will vote for candidates from viable parties, which will make it a two-horse race."

Pointing to the 2011 General Election, he said votes in Punggol East went mainly to two parties, with the "outsider party" losing his deposit. He was referring to Mr Desmond Lim of the SDA.

Scenario 3: A close fight between equals

As the candidates look to be relatively unknown faces to the voters, observers say it will be hard to predict the victor. They do not rule out a close fight similar to that in the presidential election when President Tony Tan Keng Yam won by a very slim 0.35 percentage point against former PAP backbencher Tan Cheng Bock.

Opposition veteran Wong Wee Nam argues that unlike last year's by-election in Hougang, which has a long history as a WP ward, Punggol East residents will be "free to vote". "So probably the profile of candidates is more important," he said.

But SMU's Mr Tan feels the PAP has the edge as it is the incumbent with well-oiled machinery. The opposition would not have enough time to work the ground, he added. "I wouldn't be surprised if the PAP won, but with a smaller winning margin."

But how will the opposition parties play their cards?

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said the SDP "would like to get a return on what it sees as its vision and hard work in putting together alternative policies on housing, health care and education".

The WP, on the other hand, would contest in areas that are "contiguous to its 'heartland'".

She added: "It would be interesting to see what the others would like to offer Punggol East residents. Residents will not have an easy time scrutinising all these plans, personalities and parties."