

## **Low Thia Khiang's move to step down 'a chance to reshape Workers' Party'**

**Charissa Yong**

***The Straits Times***, 5 November 2017

It's a vote of confidence in younger Workers' Party leaders, say some analysts; others say it may be linked to AHTC saga

Outgoing Workers' Party (WP) chief Low Thia Khiang's announcement that he will hand over the reins to his younger colleagues next year presents the party with a chance to remake itself if it so wishes, said observers yesterday.

Speaking at the WP's 60th anniversary dinner on Friday, Mr Low said he will not be contesting the post of secretary-general at party elections next year.

His departure after 17 years at the helm could reshape the landscape of opposition politics, which the WP now dominates as the only opposition party with a presence in Singapore's Parliament.

The party took a fairly moderate line under Mr Low, but his departure paves the way for younger leaders to change tack.

National University of Singapore (NUS) political scientist Reuben Wong said: "There are voices in the WP that feel the party should be more combative and take a position more distinct from the People's Action Party."

He added: "It is still a party in much better shape than opposition parties have been in a long time, so it is an opportunity for the younger leaders to shape the party and redefine what the WP is all about."

The WP's Mr Yee Jenn Jong, a former Non-Constituency MP, acknowledged these calls in a Facebook post yesterday.

"Many clamour for merger of opposition parties; for an immediate alternative to the PAP," he said.

He added: "There's still some way to go before an alternative government can be formed but I think this is as far as Singapore has gotten to since independence."

Analysts saw Mr Low's move as a strong vote of confidence in the opposition party's younger leaders, and a solid commitment to renewing the party's leadership.

Said Singapore Management University (SMU) law don Eugene Tan, referring to members of Mr Low's Aljunied GRC team: "It remains to be seen if Ms Sylvia Lim, Mr Pritam Singh, or Mr Chen Show Mao is able to take over and hold the party's loyalty and banner in the same way Mr Low did.

"But Mr Low is signalling that he is confident his successors are equal to the task and that the party is in good shape," he said.

Mr Yee said that the younger generation of leaders will have their own ways. "It will not be in the same way as what Mr Low did, nor what (former party leader J.B. Jeyaretnam) had done.

"Each leader has his own style and what's important is how to develop the organisational structure to survive beyond the leader of the day," he said.

Political watcher Derek da Cunha read Mr Low's move in the context of wider changes in Singapore, given the death of founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew in 2015 and impending change in the PAP leadership. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has said he is ready to step down in a few years' time.

"Girding the only opposition party with a parliamentary presence to meet this pivotal moment with a new leader would, therefore, make sense," said Dr da Cunha.

But questions remain over the Aljunied-Hougang Town Council (AHTC) saga, and a lawsuit brought in July by the town council - under the direction of a court-appointed independent panel - against senior town councillors, including Mr Low.

AHTC wants the town councillors to account for more than \$33 million in payments made to its former managing agent and service provider.

NUS' Dr Wong said Mr Low might be stepping down to focus on AHTC's issues so that other leaders can take the party forward.

Institute of Policy Studies deputy director Gillian Koh said: "Is Mr Low going to be found responsible for what happened? Or is he standing down as secretary-general of WP because of this?"

She added: "One reason he may be standing down could be to convince voters that he will take full responsibility for the AHTC troubles."

SMU's Associate Professor Tan also said Mr Low's move might pre-empt a scenario where the lawsuit results in him being ineligible to contest in a parliamentary election.

But WP's Mr Yee disagreed that stepping down has anything to do with the impending lawsuit.

"The plan for succession was laid out long ago and implemented in steps," he said.

Low Thia Khiang speaks during the Workers' Party 60th anniversary dinner.