

## **Opposition: Are they Ready?**

**Tham Yuen-C**

***The Straits Times***, 1 November 2014

The ground is certainly fertile for the opposition to grow: The People's Action Party (PAP) suffered its biggest voter setback in the 2011 General Election (GE2011), and lost two subsequent by-elections.

Disgruntlement on the ground had been brewing before that, and calls to challenge the status quo have become louder.

But pundits say the opposition camp's lack of talent, unity and experience in management continues to render it too weak to unseat the PAP and take on the job of governing a nation.

Indeed, opposition figure Goh Meng Seng, 44 - a former secretary-general of the National Solidarity Party (NSP) who contested on the party's ticket in 2011, and on a Workers' Party (WP) ticket in the 2006 election - declares there is no one opposition party that can take the helm any time soon. "Although WP can be a very strong opponent, I do not think in five to 10 years' time, it can become the dominant party," he says.

It is a fact not lost on the party itself.

The WP is opposition top dog, with seven elected MPs and two Non-Constituency MPs in Parliament - none of the other six opposition parties that contested in the last election even have elected MPs. But, as it puts it, it cannot form a government yet, though it can be the PAP's "co-driver".

A problem that plagues the opposition camp is one the PAP itself is also facing: the difficulty in attracting and keeping talent.

Several newcomers who made a splash in the last election have either left their parties or gone quiet.

Most recently, GE2011 darling Nicole Seah quit the NSP. But the WP's showing in GE2011 has at least eased the situation. With an opposition ticket now seen as a viable way to win, such parties may be able to attract better-quality candidates, says Mr Goh.

However, when it comes to running the country, opposition parties have an uphill task proving they have the sheer ministerial experience and know-how to do so.

Take the WP. Its track record on the ground managing the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council has been hit-and-miss, observes consultancy boss and former Nominated MP (NMP) Viswa Sadasivan.

It has had problems with submitting its town council reports on time, and has also been embroiled in skirmishes with the National Environment Agency over hawker-centre cleaning and the running of an allegedly unauthorised fair.

***NO VIABLE ALTERNATIVE***

Whether or not one sides with the opposition or PAP over the long-drawn saga on who was responsible, some voters will still be upset at having to suffer the consequences of such mix-ups, Mr Sadasivan notes.

This leads to another factor weighing on the opposition's ability to challenge the PAP's dominance: While the former typically gains when the latter fumbles, how can it grow on its own merits, especially when the two sides are ideologically not so different?

No opposition party has presented an alternative way to run the country, notes National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist and former NMP Paulin Straughan.

While various parties such as the NSP and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) have come up with alternative policy papers on areas such as education, health and the Central Provident Fund to rival the PAP's, no party has yet set itself up as a diametric one with a different, but viable, way to manage the country.

Their task is complicated by the fact that the PAP's sheer success, hinged on its successful delivery of economic promises, has made it hard for other parties to come up with alternatives that are still attractive to the majority.

Given that Singaporeans are already used to certain levels of comfort and stability, a vastly different tack by the opposition would scare off voters. Mr Sadasivan notes that the SDP's proposal of zero growth, for example, has not gained traction.

Even so, with Singapore facing problems that governments around the world are struggling with - such as an ageing population and slower economic growth - there will be a strong enough menu of issues to continue to stoke the desire for a viable opposition, says NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser.

NUS political scientist Bilveer Singh reckons that the opposition will improve its standing over time, but will not be able to dislodge the PAP from its political dominance just yet.

"All the advantages that the PAP had for 60 years continue to favour it, and all the disadvantages the opposition has continue to curse it. This is likely to continue for another 15 to 20 years," he says.

Instead, opposition gains are likely to be incremental and the parties will need time to prove themselves before they can make further inroads.

It took several opposition parties four challenges over a period of 20 years before the WP prised Aljunied GRC from PAP's grip. And even in the opposition stronghold of Hougang, under the WP since 1991, the party's vote share has changed an average of 5 percentage points each election.

But a question mark over the future is whether the opposition parties can avoid past fragmentation. Several opposition parties have hit headlines with unhappy break-ups, key members quitting politics or leaving to form their own parties.

Mr Benjamin Pwee left the Singapore People's Party to join the Democratic Progressive Party, and former civil servant Tan Jee Say left the SDP to run for president, then founded the Singaporeans First Party.

So, PAP dominance may well stay - but of a kind it has not experienced before, if the opposition grows in strength. With a smaller majority, the PAP will no longer have unquestioning obedience from Singaporeans. Politics will become messier, unpredictable, more "normal".