

Opposition parties point fingers at electoral system for poor showing

Rachel Chang

The Straits Times, 5 November 2015

Debate on whether opposition parties were hobbled by an uneven electoral playing field dominated a panel yesterday, featuring politicians from four different parties.

In opening remarks at the final session of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) post-election conference, Singapore Democratic Party chief Chee Soon Juan said "the PAP wins because elections are neither free nor fair".

Dr Chee, who led the SDP team in Holland-Bukit Timah GRC and got 33.4 per cent of the vote, said PAP's "control" of mainstream media and the Elections Department (ELD) disadvantaged opposition parties, which were given airtime during the nine-day campaign, but ignored for the years between elections.

But PAP's Mr Ong Ye Kung, who is Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills), said opposition parties were not unfairly disadvantaged.

The ELD is run by neutral civil servants, he said, and information and news flow freely in Singapore. "I don't know what is the freeing up that's required. But we do have one rule still, that is the right of reply ."

An IPS survey released yesterday found that 79 per cent of voters agreed or strongly agreed that the election system is fair to all parties.

None of the panellists made reference to this, but Singapore People's Party chairman Lina Chiam cited challenges she faced while campaigning, like being refused entry into condominiums.

What SPP could not provide voters, she said, was "incentives" like the \$5 million in upgrading projects PAP MP Sitoh Yih Pin lobbied from the Housing Board after he won the single-seat constituency in 2011.

Mr Ong was asked by blogger Alex Au if the PAP would use its strong electoral mandate to take controversial actions like repealing Section 377A, which criminalises gay sex.

"Sometimes it's not for the Government to deal with it. You can be the largest animal in the jungle but you are not the jungle," he replied.

"We may be the government of the day but we are not larger than society. Some issues are for society to evolve and to move to a new position," he said.

Earlier, Mr Ong also argued that the PAP's win was narrower than it seemed: Despite exceptional factors such as SG50 and the death of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the PAP won only one seat back from the Workers' Party - Punggol East.

The WP declined to appear on yesterday's panel.

National Solidarity Party secretary-general Lim Tean said the lesson his party has drawn is that the pitch to voters for the opposition to be a "co-driver" on the national stage "is no longer relevant".

That pitch was popularised by WP chief Low Thia Khiang in 2011.

"The opposition have to be prepared to drive their own policy cars and persuade Singapore voters to ride in their cars. It's no longer possible for us to hitch a ride with the PAP and hope to modify a car that does not belong to us," Mr Lim said.