

PAP salvo targets Workers' Party 'star' Chen **Ng Eng Hen queries his ability to identify with aspirations of S'poreans**

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The People's Action Party (PAP) has called on the Workers' Party (WP) to tell voters if its candidate Chen Show Mao can identify with the aspirations of Singaporeans, in what analysts see as the first salvo fired by the ruling party at what has been billed as the WP's 'star catch' ahead of the general election.

The PAP's organising secretary, Dr Ng Eng Hen, has written to The Straits Times Forum Page to criticise the WP for not answering directly why Mr Chen, 50, is choosing to enter politics now, after having spent some 40 years of his life overseas.

'His entire career has been as a corporate lawyer in the United States and China. His wife and children do not live in Singapore. He now turns up and asks Singaporeans to elect him as a Member of Parliament.

'Surely voters have a right to know from the Workers' Party if such a candidate can identify with the aspirations of Singaporeans and has a stake in our future? These questions should not be brushed aside and deserve a direct answer,' wrote Dr Ng.

The letter comes in the wake of two others to the Forum Page. Mr Benjamin Chow, in a letter published last Thursday, said that while the return of a fellow citizen to share his expertise is always welcome, he was wary of those who choose to return 'when the pickings are ripe'.

WP chief Low Thia Kiang refuted Mr Chow the next day, saying Mr Chen 'is at the peak of his career and has nothing to gain being on an opposition ticket'.

In his letter, Dr Ng contrasted the WP's lack of clarity to the PAP's own approach of getting its candidates to answer openly.

He cited the examples of Dr Janil Puthucheary and Ms Foo Mee Har, both former Malaysians, who were asked about their being new citizens when they were first introduced as PAP candidates.

'They answered directly to allow voters to judge their motives and sincerity,' said Dr Ng.

'They and their families have made Singapore their home for the last 10 and 21 years respectively, working and living here.'

Taiwan-born Mr Chen, who did national service here before becoming a Singapore citizen, declined comment when contacted yesterday. He said he would reply after seeing the published letter.

He has, however, said in an earlier interview with The Straits Times that he is relocating back to Singapore for good and intends to buy property here.

He said he would contest the next election if he did not win this round.

Former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong sees the PAP salvo as an indication the party views Mr Chen as a credible threat, while Singapore Management University (SMU) Assistant Professor Eugene Tan calls it a 'pre-emptive ruse to place the issue in people's minds'.

Observers note that this is not the first time the PAP is making an issue of election candidates living overseas.

In 2007, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong criticised the WP's Aljunied team for going 'Awol' after the general election the year before.

Among them were Mr James Gomez and Mr Tan Wui-Hua, who both left after the election to work overseas.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said different parties have to decide for themselves what kind of overseas candidates they want.

In his letter, Dr Ng noted that potential PAP candidates who have been working overseas for many years are advised to first come back and 're-establish their roots', by moving back with their families, working here and getting to know the local issues first.

Analysts also note the timing of Dr Ng's letter, which they say suggests the general election is very near.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser called it a 'good move', as opposition parties are likely to question the 'Singaporean-ness' of PAP candidates who are new citizens.

'It is better to fire the first salvo, going on the offensive and putting others on the defensive, than to be shot at and be put on the defensive.

'What's more, the salvo is aimed at, I believe, the WP's 'A' team,' he said.

Sources have said that Mr Chen is likely to be fielded in Aljunied GRC, together with WP chairman Sylvia Lim and three others.

SMU's Prof Tan expressed concern that if the issue of Mr Chen's overseas stay is played up too much, it could prove divisive and also play up unnecessary fears in Singapore politics.