

Pritam retracts coalition suggestion **WP clarification comes one day after remarks at IPS forum on party renewal**

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The Workers' Party (WP) has clarified that being part of a coalition government is not one of its aims, although it is 'prepared to work with other political parties in the interest of Singaporeans'.

Asked by The Sunday Times yesterday if the WP aims to be a member of a coalition government one day, Mr Pritam Singh, one of the five MPs in Aljunied GRC and a member of the party's central executive committee since last month, replied: 'No, that's not one of our aims... The party has never discussed the idea of coalition at all.'

Also responding to The Sunday Times, WP secretary-general Low Thia Khiang said: 'I do not wish to respond to hypothetical questions, but as a matter of principle, WP is prepared to work with other political parties to further the interest of Singaporeans and, when it is called upon, to act in the interest of the nation.'

The Sunday Times put the questions to the two WP men following remarks by Mr Singh at a political forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) last Friday.

Mr Singh, who joined the WP last year, was one of three panellists during a session on party renewal, the other two being Sembawang GRC MP Vikram Nair of the People's Action Party (PAP), and Ms Hazel Poa, the new secretary-general of the National Solidarity Party (NSP).

During the question-and-answer session, Professor Kishore Mahbubani, the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, asked Mr Singh and Ms Poa when the opposition would be ready to form the next government, and whether the opposition would one day consolidate to 'just one or two parties'.

Mr Singh replied that the WP would form the government only when it has at least 44 candidates who are voted in, adding 'that decision will not be made by WP, it will be made by the people of Singapore if they find our candidates are deserving to be in government'.

Currently, Parliament has 87 seats and a party must have at least 44 seats to have the clear majority to form the government.

Going on to suggest the possibility of a coalition government, Mr Singh said: 'Perhaps I may have overreached myself by saying we need to get 44. It may be the case in the future that the PAP only wins 30 seats and they have to form a coalition government, and realise there is only a finite number of individual parties they want to work with.'

He added: 'Let's not rule out the prospects of the PAP being forced into coalition politics. And coalition governments don't mean things don't happen... (there) could be unity government... There is a huge political space there for us to actually think about, insofar as how politics in Singapore... is going forward.'

Yesterday, Mr Singh said his comments at the IPS forum were personal remarks and just a 'theoretical exercise'.

Asked about the likelihood of the WP forming a coalition government, he said: 'That is something you should ask the PAP; that's for them or any other party in that position to decide.'

Contacted by The Sunday Times, the PAP declined to comment on Mr Singh's remarks.

At Friday's forum, responding to Prof Mahbubani, the NSP's

Ms Poa said the constraint on the opposition was not so

much having enough candidates elected, but rather, getting '15 ministerial-calibre candidates'.

'If you have that, you can persuade voters that these are the people who are going to run the ministries, the country. The quality of the young candidates would then not be of as much importance,' she said.

Ms Poa added that she saw the 'genesis' of a joint shadow Cabinet among the opposition parties, and hoped it would emerge in the next five years.

She believed there would be some form of consolidation among opposition parties 'when the climate is right'.

While the WP's good showing in the recent election could 'provide the impetus for the other opposition parties to come together', there is also 'certain historical baggage we need to clear first', she said.

The NSP hopes to achieve 'a higher level of collaboration and cooperation' with other opposition parties, she added.