

SDP to go ahead and field Vincent Wijesingha **Video showing party's candidate at gay forum sparks petitions online**

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It was business as usual for the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) a day after it squared off with the People's Action Party (PAP) team for Holland-Bukit Timah over a statement questioning its agenda on gay issues.

Morale appeared unaffected as party volunteers prepared election posters outside the party headquarters off Upper Thomson Road and party leaders pored over their plans indoors.

SDP sources say the party is sticking to its guns about fielding Dr Vincent Wijesingha, whom it regards as a star candidate in its Holland-Bukit Timah line-up.

Opposition veteran Wong Wee Nam, who is close to SDP leaders, said: 'The SDP is not likely to pull him out. He's too good a candidate and they have confidence in him.'

Dr Wong added that the party was already prepared for something like this, so its members were not at all rattled by Dr Vivian Balakrishnan.

On Monday, the PAP team led by Dr Balakrishnan highlighted an online video showing SDP's Dr Wijesingha at a forum on gay issues, and asked whether he and the party intended to pursue the gay cause in the political arena.

In response, the SDP put up a video of party chief Chee Soon Juan declaring that neither the party nor any of its candidates was pursuing a gay agenda. He also called on Dr Balakrishnan to stop engaging in 'smear tactics'.

Dr Chee said yesterday he had nothing more to add on the episode, when asked how the party was doing in the aftermath.

But election posters spotted by The Straits Times still featured Dr Wijesingha's face alongside expected running mate Tan Jee Say.

The PAP's Holland-Bukit Timah team also declined further comment on the issue yesterday.

Online, however, it was a different matter.

Petitions have been started, both supporting and denouncing Dr Wijesingha, and everyone from political bloggers to gay activists has weighed in.

One commentator was the National Solidarity Party's Nicole Seah, a candidate in Marine Parade GRC, who gave her take on clause S377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises sex between men.

'What is eroding the fabric of society? Is 377A even as big a problem as it is made out to be?' she asked, before bringing up other societal problems like high housing prices, long waits for rental flats and a lack of benefits for single mothers.

'If you buy into the argument that repealing this code will have a direct causal effect to erode the fabric of society, do take some time to think about what you have observed around you as a Singaporean over the past few years,' she concluded in a post that has drawn more than 250 comments and almost 1,500 Facebook 'likes' as at press time.

Still, analysts like Singapore Management University (SMU) law lecturer Eugene Tan said some voters may view Dr Balakrishnan's salvo about SDP's stand as legitimate.

Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said the question of a candidate's planned legislative agenda can be raised of all candidates, so voters can make an informed choice about which MP gets their vote.

Political risk analyst Azhar Ghani said that one theory as to why Dr Balakrishnan chose to draw attention to the video was that it was meant as a response to SDP candidate Tan Jee Say's charge that the Government had 'lost its moral compass'.

He noted that the minister had been at the forefront of the casino issue when the idea was mooted.

Mr Azhar said he is unsure whether the move will backfire on the PAP, though some young voters may be turned off.

'The SDP has already said it won't be pursuing a gay agenda, so it boils down to whether voters are convinced, or whether Dr Balakrishnan has sown enough doubts,' he said.

One thing most analysts agree on is that if the PAP harps on the issue, it is possible that voters will think the video incident has degenerated into a smear campaign, said Mr Tan.

If the PAP backs off on the issue, it will not be affected, he reckoned.

Still, one analyst has questioned the need to put out such a statement, especially since the subject of homosexuality is hardly ever divorced from religion.

Sociologist Terence Chong from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies said that it was 'regretful that such a statement was made because homosexuality cuts close to the religious and moral bone'.

'The statement revived the very faultlines that opened up during the Aware saga, and replayed the same antagonisms that unfolded then,' he added.

'At a General Election that has so many crucial issues on the table - rising cost of living, helping the poor, leadership renewal, immigration - throwing homosexuality into the mix simply distracts the electorate,' he said.