

## **The state of play in Punggol East**

**In this four-way race, what might cause voters to swing in favour of one party over the rest?**

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Punggol East resident Shela Rafi is in a quandary, with a week to go before she heads to the ballot box.

The 45-year-old housewife plumped for the People's Action Party's (PAP) Mr Michael Palmer in the 2011 General Election because of his sincerity and good track record, but wants to size up his replacement, Dr Koh Poh Koon, before deciding whether to vote for the ruling party again.

She is among those voters in the north-east constituency who are still mulling over their decision. This is understandable, as the by-election has come sooner than most expected.

Since Nomination Day on Wednesday, there have been four candidates courting voters but most say it is realistically a race to the post between just two: the PAP and the Workers' Party (WP), the opposition party with the strongest, most credible brand.

With one week to go before Polling Day, where do these two parties stand? Which looks set to hold on to its vote share of 2011 and perhaps improve on it? Which might see its vote share whittled away, and why?

Insight delves into the factors weighing on the minds of swing voters.

### ***The candidates***

The Prime Minister sprang a surprise by calling a snap poll, and analysts mostly said he did so because he saw a political advantage for the PAP.

Now, though, the message coming through from voters is that they have not had time to get to know the PAP's new man on the ground.

With their former MP, Mr Palmer, who served them from 2006 until last month, there was a sense of connection and a strong likeability factor.

But his replacement, Dr Koh, who has in the past week been meeting residents for the first time, is still working on building up his ties with residents.

Says Mr Yeo Wee Lee, 53, a resident in the ward: "Michael was sincere, we all liked him. He had a way of connecting with the ground. But now I don't feel like I know the new PAP candidate as well."

In contrast, the WP's Ms Lee Li Lian has the benefit of having contested in the ward before in the 2011 General Election.

She got a respectable 41 per cent to Mr Palmer's 54.5 per cent, though she worked the ground only for a few months leading up to the GE.

Resident Lawrence Lim, 32, a building consultant, says: "I voted for her the last time. She came across as down-to-earth and friendly."

In fielding her rather than either of its two Non-Constituency MPs Gerald Giam and Yee Jenn Jong, who have enjoyed higher profiles since entering Parliament two years ago, the WP demonstrates commitment, say analysts.

Former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong says: "The WP's message to the voters is 'we want to build a relationship with you. We are committed to you'."

This familiarity gives Ms Lee an edge over Dr Koh, says opposition veteran Wong Wee Nam, though the sales trainer lacks the stellar academic credentials of her rival, a colorectal surgeon.

Other observers contend though that the PAP candidate has the party brand behind him, and can point to the ruling party's good track record in Pasir Ris-Punggol Group Representation Constituency (GRC) and Punggol East, which was carved out of the GRC in 2011.

Former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin says: "Residents have said Michael Palmer's performance on the ground has been good. It's overall a very well-run estate, with no big local issues."

What will also count will be the candidates' performances at the rallies, which are a chance for voters to get a better sense of what they stand for, and for the parties to fire up support and build rapport.

Dr Koh held his first rally last night, while Ms Lee will hold hers tonight.

### ***By-election effect***

At general elections, the PAP can count on the desire of most Singaporeans for a PAP government to anchor their share of the vote.

Many Singaporeans still believe that the responsible thing to do is to vote for the government they want, and not to take chances for fear of a freak result that will see the PAP lose power.

But in a by-election, there is no such risk, say observers such as veteran PAP MP Charles Chong and former WP candidate Eric Tan.

Voters will be much more willing to use their ballot to signal dissatisfaction, knowing there will be no change in the government of the day, adds Mr Siew.

"It's a question of how many of the 54.5 per cent who voted for Palmer would be willing to vote 'no' to send a message to PAP," he says.

Mr Chong adds: "For many, they will say 'it's okay, don't give PAP such an overwhelming majority that they think they are doing a good job'."

Of course, there are some 25 per cent to 30 per cent of the electorate who form the PAP's die-hard support base and they can be counted on to vote for the man in white.

"The PAP has done a good job so far, I've everything I need here in Punggol East," says Mr C. H. Zhong, 78.

But reaching out to the middle ground - typically the 40 per cent of voters at a general election who have no strong party loyalties - is key.

This proportion is possibly higher in Punggol East, given the ward's demographics.

Residents are relatively younger, more well-educated, and better off than in some other wards.

Just 24 per cent are older than 50, compared to 29 per cent nationwide.

There are also no three-room flats and about 60 per cent of residents live in five-room flats, executive flats or private housing.

A significant share of this middle- to upper-middle-income bloc of residents may well subscribe to the belief that there should be greater political pluralism, "to properly represent all the interests and concerns", says Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh.

"This is not a plain working-class constituency, so they would be willing to give the opposition in general a fair hearing," she adds.

The opposition also has another thing going for it.

Since the 2011 General Election, more Singaporeans may have come round to the belief that voting for the opposition is in their best interest, as it makes the PAP sit up and address their concerns. They associate the Government's policy recalibrations in areas such as the inflow of foreigners, housing supply and public transport with the strong message voters sent in May 2011, when they whittled the ruling party's majority to its lowest since independence.

The challenge for the PAP today is to continue to manage expectations and soothe anger over their recent policy mis-steps, even as its efforts to fix these problems have, as PAP veteran Mr Chong notes, yet to fully bear fruit.

"It's still early days and these improvements will take time. The PAP can only present its full report card before the next GE," he says.

Insiders say that is why the PAP is framing the by-election as a close contest, as it does not want to give the impression of a ruling party that takes Singaporeans and their vote for granted.

It also hopes to keep the focus on local issues and how their man on the ground can make Punggol East a better home for residents.

Dr Koh, who introduced himself as a "son of Punggol" when he was unveiled as the PAP candidate, has stressed he wants to tackle local concerns, from more childcare facilities to better transport options.

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean also said on Wednesday that "when the voters decide, they should decide on the basis of who will be the best person to represent them in Parliament, look after their future and make sure that Punggol East will be a better place to live in".

But if the opposition can thwart the PAP's effort, and instead elevate the by-election to a "barometer" of national support for the PAP Government, as WP chairman Sylvia Lim has already sought to do, then they can make a pitch for votes to bolster their ranks in Parliament, to serve as a check on the Government.

Former WP member, Mr Tan, says: "Now more than ever, people can see the need for opposition voices.

"After Aljunied GRC fell in 2011, the PAP made a slew of changes - proof that voting for opposition is an effective way to make the Government more responsive to the people."

That is what the WP would like to be uppermost on voters' minds, and it is a theme Ms Lee and other party heavyweights can be expected to touch on in their rally speeches.

It will also hope to turn the recent Action Information Management (AIM) saga, in which software used by town councils was sold to a PAP-owned company, to its advantage.

The WP can claim that the pressure it put on the PAP to explain how the transaction was in the public interest, is but the latest case in which its presence in Parliament has seen results in terms of greater transparency and accountability.

The Government announced a review of the AIM transaction and the role of town councils a day before the writ of election was issued. Mr George Lee, 49 and self-employed, cited this as an example of why he is rooting for the WP.

He tells Insight: "The opposition has always been suppressed by the PAP. But now they are showing what they can do when they have a presence in Parliament."

Not everyone will agree with his rosy assessment of the WP's performance thus far.

Political scientist Reuben Wong notes: "WP has come under criticism for not being confrontational enough in Parliament. Although, for others, that is a sign of a centrist opposition party, able to work with the PAP."

During the debate over ministerial salaries, for example, the WP was said to have softened its position significantly. For years before that, it had championed linking political pay to the poor.

"Previous speeches by Mr Low or Ms Sylvia Lim were much more combative and cited much lower figures as proposed salaries," says Dr Wong.

"But in that instance, they went with a formula with a figure that was not very different from the PAP's proposal."

The WP's flip-flop over some issues, including foreign workers, was also raised during last year's Hougang by-election.

As Ms Lee herself has acknowledged, Punggol East is also a gauge of the WP's showing since 2011, and "whether voters have confidence to give us the vote".

### ***The swing***

Even some in the PAP camp, sensing the opposition's momentum since the 2011 General Election, are already predicting that Dr Koh's vote share could fall below 50 per cent.

Former MP Ong Ah Heng, who showed up on Nomination Day on Wednesday to lend support to the PAP's new face, said he expects WP to keep its 41 per cent and possibly improve on it.

But whether or not Ms Lee can garner enough votes to win is difficult to say at this point, with about half the campaigning period left.

The PAP is on the defensive in this race and it knows it cannot afford to be complacent. It is tapping on its grassroots network to carefully track shifts in ground sentiments.

Says one PAP campaign insider: "We are getting feedback from the ground daily from different kinds of sources, and tweaking our strategy as we go along based on this."

They are also monitoring closely the reactions online to what their candidate does and says.

The question is whether the PAP can respond in time to any negative shifts and craft ways to reverse them.

As for WP, they are just going all out to reach voters and show the personal touch, with their MPs out in force to help knock on doors. Ms Lee has promised to reach every unit in the estate of 127 HDB blocks, to build on her 41 per cent vote share the last time.

But the four-cornered fight means the Singapore Democratic Alliance's Mr Desmond Lim and Reform Party's Mr Kenneth Jeyaretnam will draw some votes from opposition supporters, says former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin.

And because of the small number of voters in single-seat wards, a swing of just one or two thousand votes makes a big difference.

With 31,649 voters in Punggol East, all it takes is for 320 voters to switch sides to cause a 1 percentage point swing.

The tightness of the race means the WP needs to chip away at SDA candidate Desmond Lim's vote share of 4.5 per cent in 2011, by any means possible.

This election could yet turn decisively on a comment or action that does not go down well with voters.

And there are likely many twists ahead, say observers, with six more days of hustings, followed by Cooling-Off Day and then Polling Day on Jan 26.

Watching from the sidelines, Mr Chong says: "Anything can happen, all parties should be careful not to make any mis-steps, or it will be very hard to recover."