

Will Fengshan take some heat off East Coast GRC?

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Marine Parade GRC may pose a tougher fight for PAP in the east

Over the past two days, the People's Action Party (PAP) has named its line-ups for two GRCs it won by the closest of margins in the 2011 General Election.

With both Marine Parade GRC and East Coast GRC expecting a tight contest at the Sept 11 polls given the likely strong challenge from the Workers' Party (WP), the PAP has stuck with incumbents in both GRCs.

Two key questions on the minds of voters, pundits and yes, bookies, over the next 15 days will be: Who will win, and by how much?

The contest for both GRCs in eastern Singapore cannot be seen in isolation from equally hard fights expected in two adjacent SMCs carved out by the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee: Fengshan and MacPherson.

The PAP is headed for a far tougher fight in Fengshan than in MacPherson. As a result, the party may find some of the heat cooling off from East Coast GRC, while Marine Parade GRC is headed for a fiercer contest.

Why should the state of play in Fengshan, with 23,404 voters, and MacPherson, with 28,481 voters, matter to its larger neighbours?

Four-MP East Coast GRC has 99,015 voters, and five-MP Marine Parade GRC has 146,087 voters.

Observers note that voters tend to be affected by developments in neighbouring constituencies, just as residents in Aljunied GRC in areas bordering WP stronghold Hougang before 2011 have tended to be more supportive of the WP.

A key factor for some voters in giving the WP its first-ever GRC in 2011 was the fact that they felt the PAP would otherwise win all the other constituencies it contested.

But Singapore voters also appear to prefer gradual, rather than stark, change. And such an effect might just be at work come Sept 11.

As Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies notes, if the WP fields someone seen to be strong in Fengshan, this "may make voters in other parts of the island think that since Fengshan might fall, the need for an opposition voice in Parliament is satiated".

There will then be less need for them to seriously consider electing non-PAP politicians into Parliament, she adds.

In other words, East Coast GRC voters may well opt to retain their MPs if they feel voters in Fengshan might give the WP a shot.

Will they? When votes were counted in the 2006 and 2011 general elections, counting agents reported that some polling districts that are now in Fengshan SMC saw a lower vote share for

the PAP compared to other areas of East Coast GRC, where the PAP garnered 54.8 per cent of the votes against the WP.

Hence some might now believe that the PAP rates its chances of winning Fengshan this year as slim, given that it is fielding a new candidate there - the first time it has done so in a new SMC since GRCs were introduced in 1988.

No candidate or team enters an election expecting to lose, not least the PAP. Indeed, East Coast GRC anchor minister Lim Swee Say said yesterday he has strong confidence in Ms Cheryl Chan, 38, the PAP's candidate in Fengshan.

"Without that confidence, we would not have placed Cheryl in Fengshan," he said. But the party could be just hedging its bets. Even if that were so, the PAP has a strong candidate in Ms Chan, who has been active on the ground there over the past 10 years.

The WP has yet to announce its candidate for the ward, but law firm partner Dennis Tan, 44, who joined the WP after the 2011 general election, has been actively doing house visits in recent weeks.

As for MacPherson SMC, PAP candidate Tin Pei Ling, 31, is a full-time MP who is popular among residents in spite of a rocky start at the 2011 General Election. That year, widespread criticism of her age and inexperience, and over her entering politics on the coat-tails of her teammates, saw the PAP get 56.6 per cent of votes in Marine Parade GRC against the National Solidarity Party (NSP).

However, in areas that have now come under MacPherson SMC, the PAP pulled in more votes in the 2011 elections than in other areas of the GRC, with the exception of Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong's Marine Parade ward.

The WP has not named its candidate for MacPherson, but it could be funeral services company executive Bernard Chen, 29. The NSP has also maintained it intends to contest MacPherson.

How hot might Marine Parade get? The PAP won Marine Parade GRC by a comfortable margin of 18,360 votes in 2011. Without MacPherson, there is no guarantee this may not be chipped away.

The PAP won East Coast GRC by 10,653 votes in 2011 - a drop of 18,405 votes from its margin of 29,058 in 2006. Then, Marine Parade GRC was uncontested.

The PAP teams in both GRCs have been working hard on the ground to engage voters in recent months, especially in Joo Chiat, which as an SMC saw the PAP win by just 388 votes in 2011 and which is now part of Marine Parade GRC.

ESM Goh staying on has further shored up the Marine Parade GRC team led by Social and Family Development Minister Tan Chuan-Jin, and deterred the WP from sending a top leader there.

The WP's team there is set to be led by Non-Constituency MP Yee Jenn Jong, with its East Coast team led by NCMP Gerald Giam.

The WP's leaders seem to have calculated that this contest may be a tough one for them as well.

The battle ahead is still set to be tight. But an added factor may yet work in the PAP's favour in both SMCs: some studies suggest a female candidate may well have a slight edge in winning over undecided voters, especially if she has been on the ground far longer.