

Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council issue; WP town council problems 'set to be key election issue'

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The way the Workers' Party (WP) town council has been managed is expected to be one of the key issues during the nine days on the hustings as election campaigning gets under way today, observers say.

Some foresee the party explaining how it fell into the "mess" and playing the underdog card.

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) strategy, on the other hand, is likely to place emphasis on municipal issues as it believes voters, being emotional, will give local issues special attention, Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said at a forum yesterday at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

"So they feed it. And then they assign a few ministers to respond or rebut on the national issues" when the opposition parties bring them up, she added.

Dr Koh was responding to a question from among the 130 students, staff and alumni at the forum, on why the PAP seems to focus on municipal issues when introducing its candidates, while the WP's focus was on specific measures for national policies.

In doing so, the PAP wants to counter the opposition argument that with more opposition in Parliament, the Government will be more responsive, she said. It wants to send voters the message that they should think hard about carrying the burden of putting "seven, 20, opposition MPs in place" as it can hurt them because the MP they vote for must also be able to run their town council effectively, she added.

SMU assistant professor of law Jack Lee, however, noted that in embarking on this strategy, the PAP will probably take more of a "reward" approach.

"In the past, it was a threat - 'if you don't vote (for us), you're not going to get these things'. They haven't said that this time round. It's more like 'if you vote for us, look, you can get these things'.

"They've learnt from how people found it very distasteful the past few times," he said.

Communications consultant P.N. Balji expects the WP's rallies to focus hard on its performance in the managing of Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council.

He said WP chief Low Thia Kiang, who has been relatively silent on the matter, could likely "elaborate on what actually happened".

"They really fell into a mess, but there were reasons why they fell into the mess and I suspect they will try and explain that and I think they will play the underdog card very effectively," he said.

But what appears to be the "most seductive argument" in the opposition camp is that the PAP changed after GE2011, underlining the need for checks and balances on the Government, Mr Balji said.

Dr Koh said surveys show the need for such checks is almost as equally popular among people as the idea of an efficient government.

The younger generation and better-off voters are more inclined to take this view, she added.

SMU associate professor of law Eugene Tan, who moderated the panel, envisions the Sept 11 polls as a "watershed" election, as some political parties could become irrelevant. "As democratic consolidation takes place at greater speed, some parties might be left by the wayside," he said.

The 90-minute forum also saw the launch of a guidebook on the elections. About 4,000 copies of the book by SMU Apolitical, a student political affairs club, will be given to tertiary and secondary institutions and national libraries.

It will also be on the club's website in a few days' time.

The panel at yesterday's forum comprised Dr Gillian Koh, associate professor Eugene Tan, assistant professor Jack Lee and communications consultant P.N. Balji.