

After the high of GE2011, a reality check for the Workers' Party

Kelly Ng

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SINGAPORE — Four years after the capture of Aljunied Group Representation Constituency — a first GRC win for the Opposition — ushered a “Workers’ Party fever”, the WP was brought back to earth with a thud following the results of the recent General Election (GE).

Attendances at its open houses — held at its Syed Alwi Road headquarters — have thinned significantly in contrast to the weeks following the 2011 GE.

At the first open house after the elections four years ago, about 150 people turned up. This time, fewer than 20 members of the public showed up at the first session after the Sept 11 polls, a party volunteer said. When TODAY visited a session two weeks ago, there was just a handful of members of the public, and they were outnumbered by party members and volunteers.

In the immediate aftermath of the recent GE, many of the party members and supporters were at a loss to explain its showing: It retained its Hougang stronghold with a smaller winning margin, and scraped a victory in Aljunied GRC, which had to go through a recount. The party lost the Punggol East single-seat ward, just two years after wresting it from the People’s Action Party (PAP). Overall, WP’s share of votes in the wards it contested slipped 6.8 points to 39.8 per cent, compared with the 2011 GE.

The party is in soul-searching mode, and some answers have emerged as it continues to examine where it could have done better.

WP did not send any representative to the Institute of Policy Studies’ (IPS) post-GE conference earlier this week, where analysts and politicians dissected the GE results. Nevertheless, several party members shared with TODAY what they felt had gone wrong, the impact of the poll results on the party — especially on its bid to inject new blood — and the lessons they have drawn.

Former Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) Yee Jenn Jong said the party has to read the ground better, to avoid being taken by surprise again. “I did sense that the unhappiness (with the PAP) wasn’t very high compared to the last round,” he said. “But other than that, we did get very strong support just like the previous GE — very encouraging comments, people gave us food and drinks. Even at the rallies, we were given very strong support.”

He added: “We are still reflecting on what needs to be done for the next round. For me, it’s probably just how to read the ground better and what are the things we need to do going forward.”

Trying to explain the outcome of the GE, he pointed to a mixture of fear and “feel-good” factors owing to the country’s Golden Jubilee celebrations. “Different people have told me why they voted against us, and they fall in either of these baskets of factors,” said Mr Yee, who had led a WP team to contest in Marine Parade GRC.

He added: "Some (voters) said they really thought the Opposition was going to (oust) the PAP, and they were really frightened, so (they) voted on the conservative side. There was also a fear perpetuated by instability around us ... a combination of events around the world that just makes people have less appetite for the unknown."

The WP members TODAY spoke to conceded that they were disheartened, but they pledged to continue their efforts and not let up. In fact, given that the party failed to read the ground well enough, there is a need to step up engagement with residents not only face-to-face — which traditionally has been the party's strong suit — but online as well.

Mr Kenneth Foo, who led the WP's Nee Soon GRC team in his maiden elections and was one of three new faces co-opted into the party's Central Executive Council (CEC), said that his experience from the recent GE showed that many residents prefer to share their concerns via Facebook.

At the IPS conference, survey findings were presented to show that GE2015 was not a social media election, with mainstream media playing a bigger role. Nevertheless, the PAP was found to be the "all-rounder" in social media this election, with the most number of likes and starting early (from around 2013) in increasing Facebook posts, for example. In comparison, the WP was strong on Facebook, but not on its website.

Mr Foo, who updates his Facebook page at least once a day, said he plans to involve Nee Soon residents in grassroots activities at the WP's Hougang and Aljunied constituencies. "Residents can be our word-of-mouth to their friends and relatives who do not stay in these constituencies. They also become our eyes on the ground that identify people's concerns," he said.

WP member Dennis Tan, who will be sworn in as an NCMP when the 13th Parliament opens in January, added: "We need to improve outreach and talk to those who had decided not to vote for us this time ... the GE calls for us to work harder and leave no stone unturned."

After the elections, WP chairman Sylvia Lim suggested that the national vote swing in the PAP's favour was due to a pushback from voters sensing a growing opposition movement and less public dissatisfaction towards the ruling party. She also suggested that the uncertain external economic environment might also have played a part as voters sought a flight to safety. WP member Daniel Goh, who was appointed chair of the party's media team after the elections, had also said that the WP needs "less egoism and opportunism, more depth, humility and courage, more listening and walking".

Former WP member Eric Tan, who had led the party's East Coast GRC team in the 2011 GE but resigned after that election, felt that some voters may have been disappointed by WP's performance in Parliament. Despite advocating a "First World Parliament" in 2011, the party did not build on its gains from 2011, he said.

Since Polling Day, a slew of analyses has been published on why the PAP managed to reverse its performance at the 2011 GE. Among the factors cited were the ruling party's policy changes that addressed hot-button issues, the Lee Kuan Yew factor, and a fear that governance would weaken if the PAP witnessed a further decline in political support.

Both Mr Yee and Mr Foo pointed out that the level of support fell for all opposition parties, and not just the WP.

Still, Mr Foo acknowledged that expectations were high after the WP's gains in the past four years — during which they not only won Aljunied GRC, but also captured Punggol East Single-Member Constituency (SMC) in the 2013 by-election. "Following the breakthrough in Aljunied GRC, everyone believed we could go beyond that," he said. "On Polling Day, people were of course taken aback by the results. But from my interactions with members and volunteers, (they) are still positive about moving forward."

Still, political analyst Eugene Tan said that the financial management lapses of the now-defunct Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council were a "proverbial albatross around the WP's neck" and hurt the party's performance specifically. "It is not only a town council issue, but also reflective of how they would govern if they were in power ... So, they have lots to do to show that they can be counted on," said the Singapore Management University (SMU) law don.

The WP also displayed a sense of arrogance, Associate Professor Tan said. "They will have to mute their political swagger and let their parliamentary and constituency work do the talking," he said. Agreeing, Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie from the Nanyang Technological University's School of Humanities and Social Sciences said the party now needs to overcome one of its "key weaknesses" and show that it is capable of engaging more substantively in parliamentary debates.

SETBACK FOR LEADERSHIP RENEWAL

During the hustings, Ms Lim, 50, had framed the election as an important one for the WP's renewal. She noted that several of the party's leaders are 50 years old and above, including WP chief Low Thia Khiang, 59, Aljunied GRC candidate Chen Show Mao, 54, and herself.

After the GE, Mr Low identified the three members the party had put up for NCMPs as the future leadership core of the party. If they had been elected at the polls, it would have boosted the WP's renewal plans, said Mr Low. "The second best possible option will be for them to be NCMPs so that more Singaporeans will know them better," he had said.

At the opening session, Parliament will decide whether the WP will have its full complement of three NCMPs, after the opposition party put up Dr Goh, 42, to replace Ms Lee Li Lian, who had decided not to accept the post. The other two NCMP positions will be filled by Mr Dennis Tan, 45, and Mr Leon Perera, 44.

Given that none of its new faces were elected this time round, unlike in the 2011 GE, the WP appears to be "fast-tracking" some of them up the party ranks, said SMU's Assoc Prof Tan.

At the WP's first CEC meeting held less than a month after the GE, Mr Foo, 38, Mr Perera and former librarian Mohamed Fairoz Shariff, 36, were co-opted into the council. Mr Yee and fellow former NCMP Gerald Giam, 37, have also ceded their positions as webmaster and media chair to Mr Mohamed Fairoz and Dr Goh respectively.

These moves are tactical, said Asst Prof Woo. Leadership renewal, he said, is not just about replacing older candidates with newer ones. "It is also about replacing candidates who have

not been successful, whether in parliamentary debates or at the polls, with others who may hold the potential for doing better in the future.”

Also telling is the appointment of four new members to its Youth Wing’s executive committee, said National University of Singapore political scientist Bilveer Singh. These include Mr Ron Tan, 30, Ms Cheryl Loh, 32 — who both ran in Nee Soon — Mr Redzwan Hafidz Abdul Razak, 31, from the party’s Jalan Besar team, and Mr Muhammad Ihsan, 24, who was an election agent in MacPherson. These tactical moves demonstrate the party’s “succession game plan”, said Associate Professor Singh. “It shows the party is thinking seriously about the next generation ... it will serve the party well and help to raise its stature in the public domain,” he said.

As the redeployment of Mr Yee and Mr Giam shows, party members fall down the hierarchy if they do not have a presence in Parliament.

But Mr Yee said: “I am still committed to the cause, even if I am not in Parliament. You can only have that number of candidates (in the) national limelight, but I always believe the party brand is the single largest factor in the elections, followed by an individual’s own profile ... Elections are also primarily about grassroots work.”

He pointed to his own experience — he emerged out of the blue in the 2011 GE and ran PAP’s Mr Charles Chong close in the now-defunct Joo Chiat SMC — to show that it is “not impossible” to perform well in a GE despite being an unknown on the national stage. He added: “The irony is that even after four years in Parliament, sometimes when external events swing against you, even a lot of national prominence may not mean anything.”

Still, Asst Prof Woo said the lack of experience in parliamentary debates and town council management is disadvantageous to WP members who may have been earmarked for leadership positions. Agreeing, Assoc Prof Singh added that had the party made new inroads in constituencies such as East Coast GRC and Fengshan, or won Aljunied GRC by a more convincing margin, then it would be “in a much stronger position to talk about progress and its brand of renewal”.

A MORE AGGRESSIVE PUBLIC STANCE?

After previous elections, the party had struggled to hold on to its younger candidates, noted analysts and former WP members. “The party must learn to retain talent and value loyalty. The earlier candidates before 2011 certainly faced more risks in terms of career opportunities and being ostracised socially,” said Mr Eric Tan, who left the WP after he was overlooked — in favour of Mr Giam — for an NCMP seat in 2011. “Renewal must be inclusive and planned with the buy-in from the existing members and leaders.”

This time round, the WP’s new faces such as Dr Goh and Ms He Ting Ru, who is the secretary of the party’s Youth Wing, have kept up their public profiles through social media after the GE — posting their own views on national issues and about the party’s activities, for example.

Said Assoc Prof Tan: “(The WP) wants to demonstrate that it has hit the ground running, that the setback will not get in the way of larger plans it has to grow its standing as the dominant opposition party.”

Fronted by its new faces, the party has also seemingly taken on a more aggressive public stance in engaging the PAP Government.

Over a span of three days last month, Mr Perera and Dr Goh made public statements on behalf of the party. Mr Perera called for the setting up of a Committee of Inquiry to look into the hepatitis C outbreak at the Singapore General Hospital, while Dr Goh urged the Government to address “persistent perceptions of racial discrimination” in the wake of Singapore’s signing of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh said: “They are trying to show that they are serious about playing the role of being a check on the PAP Government ... to be on time in asking the Government tough questions, and holding it accountable to its processes.”

Assoc Prof Tan felt that it is too early to tell if the WP is taking a bolder public position on national matters. If it is, it would have to sustain the stance throughout the next four to five years “at a high tempo but with a measured approach that does not come across as opposition for opposition’s sake”, he said. “The party has to respond more affirmatively to expectations of the public and, especially, its own supporters for it to be more assertive, to push the envelope, and to engage the government more robustly.”

He added: “All eyes will be on the WP, with tabs being kept on how they take on the PAP government inside and outside of Parliament ... Much more is expected of them, given that they could hold nine seats in the 13th Parliament, and they need to show that they have the policy nous and expertise.” This will involve staying engaged on issues even when under political fire and dispensing with its conventional “hit-and-run” approach, he said. “They have to raise their game and show that they can compete and keep up with the PAP.”

To raise its credibility, Dr Koh said the WP should balance sharp insights in the House with smooth management of the Aljunied-Hougang Town Council. “They must prove themselves as good social workers on the ground and (be) there on hand to connect to the broader public whenever the occasion presents itself,” she said.

Both Mr Yee and Mr Foo downplayed the impact of the GE results on the WP’s growth and future plans, and maintained that the party has not suffered a huge blow. Mr Yee said: “Those in politics, especially opposition politics, have to understand that there are swings. It happened before in 2001. We bounced back within ten years ... It is not a disaster, there are learning points, things to reflect on for everybody.”

Mr Foo noted that the party deliberately sought to send out the message that despite the GE results, the WP’s renewal plans are on track. He said: “I don’t think we should take it as a literal kind of setback. Let’s look at what are the gaps, are voters sending signals that there are things we have not done enough, that we should improve in order to come back and mount a challenge the next time.”

On the lessons drawn from the recent GE, Mr Low characteristically played his cards close to his chest. Speaking to TODAY after a recent Meet-the-People session, he would only say that the party will let its actions do the talking. “Observe what we are doing ... I don’t think it is good to just talk,” he said.