

Analysts divided on SDP's makeover efforts

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TODAY, 9 September 2015

SINGAPORE — It has been an election season in which he spoke in Mandarin and sang in Hokkien, focused on bread-and-butter issues and tugged at the heartstrings of Singaporeans.

With these signs of change in the leader of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), the re-evaluation of Dr Chee Soon Juan has begun.

Under Dr Chee, the SDP has morphed from being like a non-governmental organisation that is adversarial and non-compromising to a political party that seeks to identify with people and their concerns, said political analyst Gillian Koh.

And its secretary-general seems to epitomise the idea that the “new SDP” is reasonable, relevant and prepared to work with any government of the day to serve voters, said Dr Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

“The SDP has tried to revive its fortunes by putting more focus on policies related to the bread-and-butter issues, rather than just issues of political liberties and civic rights to widen its reach,” she said.

“It started doing that in General Election 2011, but it has made firmer steps in that direction with each year, with its position papers and forums.”

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan was more sceptical and termed the messages from Dr Chee and the SDP in this campaign a “well-scripted charm offensive” and an “image makeover”.

“In terms of form, I think the makeover is relatively successful. But I wonder whether, in substance, Dr Chee is really all that different,” said Associate Professor Tan.

Assoc Prof Tan perceived a “tremendous gap between the old Dr Chee and the Dr Chee I’m seeing now”. He added: “He hasn’t explained the transformation — is it for real or just suave political gamesmanship?”

For people who know Dr Chee from the 1990s, he has to work harder to persuade them that this makeover is real, while voters who do not know his “self-destructing brand of politics” of the past would be more open to hearing what he has to offer, said Assoc Prof Tan.

Where Dr Chee is contesting, in Holland-Bukit Timah — with Professor Paul Tambyah, Mr Sidek Mallek and Ms Chong Wai Fung — the voters are probably the young and the middle-aged, middle-class, pragmatic and likely to be savvy professionals, said Dr Koh.

“They’re the sort of voters who take pride in not having wool pulled over their eyes by anyone. It’s the rigorous policy debates that will move them,” she said. Younger voters would be moved by the Dr Chee they see now, the recently released short film on his family and the political ideal of having an Opposition as they consider who to vote for, she added.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies' Assoc Prof Alan Chong felt that Dr Chee has found his calling "all over again" in this GE.

"In the career of most politicians, there are periods when they have to spend some time in the wilderness before finding that right moment where (their) ambition, charisma and message align with the needs of the audience, and only then, at this special moment, this person makes a comeback," he said. "I don't want to sound pre-emptive and overly optimistic, (but) this looks like a moment made for Dr Chee —GE2015."

The party's rebranding through social media and other platforms speak of the renewal of energies of Dr Chee and the SDP, said Assoc Prof Chong, who noted the warm reception to Dr Chee's rendition of the Hokkien song Ji Ba Ban, which encapsulates hot-button issues, such as cost of living, transport and immigration.

"That makes Dr Chee out to be quite a formidable opponent this round," said Assoc Prof Chong, wondering aloud if Dr Chee has successfully turned the hurt from his bruising run-ins with the People's Action Party into a strength.

"One hopes he can be a constructive Opposition (member)," added the political observer.

Some people who attended the SDP's lunchtime rally on Monday agreed that Dr Chee's image has changed. Ms Theresa Tan, 55, who is self-employed, said he was genuine, less fiery and more contained: "He's now more concerned about being another voice to represent Singaporeans."

A 62-year-old, who wanted to be known only as Mr Teo, remarked: "He seems to tell people he knows what he's doing ... The quality of his speeches is higher than many (others) for their clarity and completeness."