

By-election surprise

WP leaders caught off guard as veteran picks up nomination papers

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On the eve of Nomination Day for the Hougang by-election, what had been shaping up to be a straight contest between the People's Action Party (PAP) and the Workers' Party (WP) took a twist yesterday: Two WP members were issued with the political donations certificate for the contest, but only one is endorsed by the party.

Dr Poh Lee Guan, 51 — a former WP central executive committee member who is a veteran of three general elections — was among four people who were granted the certificate, which has to be submitted, among other requirements, to the Returning Officer at the Nomination Centre today in order to stand in the by-election.

The WP had already put forward Mr Png Eng Huat, 50, as its by-election candidate. And the party reiterated yesterday: "The Workers' Party has only nominated Mr Png Eng Huat as our candidate for Hougang Single-Member Constituency. Dr Poh Lee Guan has not informed us of any intention to contest."

It also noted that Dr Poh is "still a member of the party". However, his profile was subsequently removed from the WP's website.

According to the Elections Department, apart from Dr Poh and Mr Png, the others who were issued the political donations certificate were PAP candidate Desmond Choo, 34, and retired acupuncturist Zeng Guo Yuan. Mr Zeng, 59, a former WP member, had tried unsuccessfully to stand as an independent candidate in last year's GE.

But it was the news that Dr Poh could emerge as a candidate — against his party's wishes — that intrigued observers. Nevertheless, they felt that should Dr Poh contest in the by-election as an independent candidate, it is unlikely that he would split the votes among WP supporters.

However, Dr Poh's move — coming days after former WP GE candidate Sanjiv Kamalasanan had resigned from the party and publicly criticised its leadership — has raised longer-term questions on the unity within the Opposition party.

Dr Poh has been involved in Hougang grassroots work for at least a decade. Until recently, he was the vice-chairman of the Hougang Constituency Committee.

Sources familiar with WP and who are also well-acquainted with Dr Poh told Today that they were "not surprised" by Dr Poh's move.

They said that the former Hougang town councillor had not been a happy camper in the WP's ranks and he felt slighted by the WP leadership, after it made the "unanimous" decision — as WP chief Low Thia Kiang put it — to put up Mr Png as its by-election candidate.

Said one of them: "He knows the operations in Hougang very well and he's always supported Mr Low all this while. Then, now they are actually sending Mr Png instead of him." Dr Poh is a veteran of three GEs, having contested in the Nee Soon East single seat ward in 2001 and 2006 as well as in Nee Soon GRC last year.

He had risen through the ranks — at the 2006 GE, he was WP's first assistant secretary-general — but he fell out of favour recently.

Another source said: "By doing this, (Dr Poh) will definitely get expelled. I don't think he will do something that he knew would get him expelled without completing his mission. In other words, you can expect him to turn up at the Nomination Centre."

A Test For WP

Singapore Management University Assistant Professor Eugene Tan felt that Hougang voters sitting on the fence would now question the WP's ability to manage its members.

He added: "This is certainly a situation which the WP can do without. At this critical juncture, this raises question on the effectiveness of their selected Member of Parliament (MP) to serve the voters when he might be fighting internal party battles."

Nevertheless, Asst Prof Tan pointed out that such episodes should be expected in political parties that are gaining prominence and it would be a test on WP's resilience.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh described Dr Poh's move to pick up the nomination papers as a "real surprise" — and she reckoned the WP leaders probably felt the same way.

Dr Koh said: "The WP's statement makes it sound like it was a bit of a curved ball for them — it speaks of a house that is not quite in order in the WP at the moment."

Still, former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong pointed out: "WP has a very strong branding among Hougang voters ... Dr Poh might be known to residents in Hougang but the attention and prominence has always been on Mr Low and his party."

Disagreeing, Opposition watcher Wong Wee Nam believes that Dr Poh has his share of supporters in Hougang — having had a longer involvement in the grassroots work compared to Mr Png — and the outcome of a three-cornered fight could be unpredictable.

Dr Wong added: "Moving forward, the WP has a lot of work to do to rebuild its party's foundation again."

Mr Png could not be reached for comments. Mr Choo told ChannelNewsAsia that his campaign team would not be distracted by the possibility of a multi-cornered contest.

Said Mr Choo: "It is still about choosing the best candidate for Hougang residents for their long term interests, and this is what we're focusing on for this campaign."