

Historic Nomination Day on the cards ; More voters, contesting parties this time around; surprises can't be ruled out

TODAY, 1 September 2015

The biggest electoral battle in the Republic's history — in terms of the number of voters, political parties represented and constituency contested — begins in earnest today, when some 180 candidates representing nine groups, along with an expected smattering of independents, file their nomination papers at nine centres from 11 am.

All eyes are likely to be on Raffles Institution — the Nomination Centre for Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC), Ang Mo Kio GRC, Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC and Sengkang West Single-Member Constituency — where People's Action Party (PAP) top leaders including Mr Lee Hsien Loong and Dr Ng Eng Hen could come face-to-face with Workers' Party (WP) stalwarts Low Thia Khiang and Sylvia Lim.

Voters will also find out whether there will be any last-minute surprises in both parties' line-up for Aljunied GRC. The WP has promised to keep its A team there intact but any changes at the eleventh hour could prompt a reshuffle in the PAP line-up, with the ruling party having earlier left the door open for such a possibility.

The PAP, in a break with tradition, has announced its slates for all the battlegrounds — 16 GRCs and 13 Single-Member Constituencies — barring any last-minute changes.

The opposition parties, with the exception of the National Solidarity Party, whose preparations have been hampered by leadership changes, have all formally introduced their candidates. Most parties, however, have kept their cards close to their chest in terms of which constituencies their candidates will be contesting.

At noon, when the candidates' papers are declared to be in order, history could be made with all 89 seats contested — the first time since Singapore's independence that there will be contests in every constituency. The feat was almost matched in the previous General Election (GE) four years ago but a team made up of independents was disqualified from standing in Tanjong Pagar GRC after it failed to submit the necessary documents on time.

If things go to plan this time around, residents of Tanjong Pagar GRC — a PAP stronghold where the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew was a long-serving Member of Parliament for many years — will get to vote for the first time in more than two decades.

Analysts expect the most bruising contests to be on the eastern side of the island, where the WP, fresh from its gains in the 2011 GE — when it won Aljunied GRC — and the 2013 Punggol East by-election, will be hoping to make further inroads. Apart from Aljunied GRC, the PAP is expected to face stiff challenges from the WP in East Coast GRC, Marine Parade GRC and Fengshan SMC.

The PAP has framed this GE as one that will see voters choosing the leaders to work with them and set the future direction of the country — which celebrates the 50th anniversary of its independence this year — for decades to come.

The WP has sought to remind voters that they are “masters of the land” — in its secretary-general Low's words — through their vote. Apart from the WP, the Singapore Democratic

Party, whose chief Dr Chee Soon Juan will be contesting in his first GE since 2001 after he was discharged as a bankrupt, has also put up alternative policy proposals.

Nomination Day marks the home stretch of the election season, which has captured the attention of Singaporeans over the past two months, pausing only over the Golden Jubilee weekend last month.

Campaigning officially begins today and runs until next Wednesday, before Cooling-off Day on Sept 10.

More than 2.46 million registered electors will be heading to the ballot box, compared with about 2.35 million in 2011, and about 2.16 million in 2006.

Political analysts expect domestic concerns — such as immigration, job security and cost of living — to dominate the hustings.

Institute of Policy Studies' Gillian Koh expects the PAP to campaign on the "foundational" pillar of good governance, within which it could bring up the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council saga.

Associate Professor Reuben Wong of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Department of Political Science added that while the PAP can point to the numbers to show there have been improvements since the 2011 GE — such as more flats built, and a reduced inflow of foreign workers — it is harder to convince people over "intangibles" such as one's sense of job security, and the perception of being crowded out by foreigners.

"The PAP can say they have done many things, but the Opposition can say these are still big issues," he said.

Going by previous GEs, political scientist Lam Peng Er of the NUS' East Asia Institute noted that parties, candidates and voters should expect the unexpected. Issues tend to catch fire out of nowhere during the campaigning period, he said.