

Hougang by-election on May 26

Nomination Day set for next Wednesday Straight fight likely between PAP, WP candidates

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Today, 10 May 2012

Almost a year after Singaporeans headed to the ballot box, Hougang residents will be going to the polls again.

And the rest of the country will be watching as the Hougang by-election could, by virtue of its timing and the circumstances, turn into a referendum on how the People's Action Party and the Workers' Party have fared since the watershed General Election last year.

Yesterday, the Writ of Election was issued and other Opposition parties were quick to make clear that they will stay at ringside — paving the way for a straight fight between the likely candidates: The PAP's Desmond Choo, 34, and the WP's Png Eng Huat, 50.

While all eyes will be on the candidates, the respective party machinery will be fully behind them, with the WP and PAP big guns expected to join in the fray.

In a post on his Facebook page yesterday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reminded the residents of Hougang why a by-election had to be called in the first place — the “personal indiscretions” of former WP MP Yaw Shin Leong.

Recapping the work the PAP Government has done in the past year, Mr Lee added: “Both the WP and Mr Yaw have let down all those who voted for him. As a result of Mr Yaw's expulsion from the WP, the Hougang constituency seat fell vacant.”

Mr Lee said the by-election “will give Hougang residents the chance to elect a new MP to serve them”. He said: “I encourage Hougang voters to use this opportunity wisely, to elect the best candidate with commitment and integrity: Someone they can rely upon to express their hopes and concerns, address their needs, and make a real difference to their lives.”

WP chief Low Thia Khiang, who turned up at a Meet the People session in Hougang last night to speak to reporters, took issue with Mr Lee's comments.

“Yes, the voters should vote for a responsible candidate. That was exactly why the WP decided to remove Yaw Shin Leong because he was not being responsible,” said Mr Low, who noted that his party held a press conference and took questions from journalists on the sacking of Mr Yaw.

While Mr Low said he was caught off-guard by the timing, political analysts noted that, while the ground might not be the sweetest for the ruling party — given the economic conditions — there was little incentive for it to delay the by-election in Hougang, which has been under Opposition rule for more than two decades.

Said Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan: “(The timing) won't make a difference to PAP's electoral battle, it will be an uphill battle for them anyway ... In fact, dragging it out will take away some goodwill for PAP. So the concern is in not losing the war even though they might lose the battle.”

Assistant Professor Tan, who is also a Nominated MP, noted that Mr Lee would not want the Hougang by-election as a “source of distraction” as the Government tackles hot button issues such as housing, foreigners and transport.

SMU political scientist Bridget Welsh added that “waiting longer involves economic uncertainties that may not make the ground sweeter”.

Political analysts also pointed out that the ruling party’s decision to call the by-election could render moot the outcome of a pending court case over a by-election in Hougang.

Said Asst Prof Tan: “Now that the writ has been issued, the court could declare the judicial review as moot.”

Hougang resident Vellama Marie Muthu had filed an application on March 2 to get the High Court to, among other things, order the Prime Minister to call a by-election in her constituency within three months or a “reasonable time”.

The court was scheduled next week to hear an appeal by the Attorney-General’s Chambers (AGC) against an open court hearing on Mdm Vellama’s application.

‘IT’S EFFECTIVELY WP VS PAP’

Hours after the writ was issued, the National Solidarity Party (NSP), the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), the Singapore People’s Party (SPP) and former Presidential hopeful Tan Jee Say said they would not be contesting in Hougang.

SPP secretary-general Chiam See Tong told Channel NewsAsia that a three-cornered fight should be avoided.

In a statement, NSP secretary-general Hazel Poa said her party made the decision “after careful deliberation”.

The SDP had previously said it would not contest in a by-election in Hougang and party chief Chee Soon Juan reiterated on SDP’s Facebook page that “our position remains unchanged ... This is because our prime concern is that the constituency remains in the hands of the Opposition.”

There was speculation that Mr Tan could throw his hat in the ring but he told Today that he would not contest. In a statement, he echoed Dr Chee’s view that “our first priority is to ensure that Hougang remains with the Opposition”. Mr Tan added: “The Hougang by-election is an opportunity to demonstrate Opposition unity and build Opposition co-operation towards the next General Election.

With a straight fight on the cards, political analysts concurred that the by-election could well turn out to be a record card on how the PAP and the WP have performed since the GE last year.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said: “From the voters’ perspective, it will partly be a referendum. That’s what happens in a by-election.”

She added: “A by-election allows people to discuss broader national issues, essentially it’s a proxy between PAP and WP.”

And it would be difficult to predict how the chips would fall as both the PAP and the WP try to frame the developments in the past year to their advantage.

Said Asst Prof Tan: "WP will probably attribute the significant changes in Government policy to its increased presence in Parliament."

Pointing out that the by-election "will mainly be a referendum on WP's performance in Parliament rather than the PAP's", former NMP Siew Kum Hong said: "(The PAP will) probably bring up the ministerial-pay debates in Parliament, when the WP MPs faltered, and focus on why Mr Low Thia Khiang and (WP chairman) Sylvia Lim kept silent."

Even so, the spectre of Mr Yaw's indiscretions and the fallout would loom large during the hustings, analysts said.

"It'll be a test of how WP has managed to retain its standing after Yaw's affairs," Mr Siew noted.

Hougang residents Today spoke to were generally glad that they will be able to elect a new MP. Said Mr Tan Kay Kerng, 43, a financial adviser: "We need to have an official representative of the people and not to have a caretaker group of people who are looking after us."