

It's a four-way fight for 31,649 votes **Crowded field could dilute Opposition vote in Punggol East, analysts say**

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In contrast to the frenetic lead-up to Nomination Day - which saw the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) stage a last-minute pull-out - there were no surprises at North Vista Secondary School yesterday.

The four candidates who were expected to show up successfully filed their papers at the Nomination Centre, where supporters formed a sea of white (People's Action Party) and blue (Workers' Party), with a smattering of yellow (Reform Party) and neon green (Singapore Democratic Alliance).

In line with election tradition here, former private tutor Ooi Boon Ewe and acupuncturist Zeng Guoyan turned up again, and lapped up the media attention. As expected, both failed to file their papers, with the former claiming that he lost his nomination papers and the latter being ineligible due to previous run-ins with the law.

Following the close of nominations yesterday, more than 31,000 voters in Punggol East will head to the polls on Jan 26 to elect their representative from among the PAP's Dr Koh Poh Koon, 40, the WP's Ms Lee Li Lian, 34, the RP's Mr Kenneth Jeyaretnam, 53, and the SDA's Mr Desmond Lim, 45.

This will be the first four-way electoral tussle in Singapore since 1997. Then, PAP candidate Low Seow Chay won with almost 62 per cent of the vote in Chua Chu Kang single seat ward, with none of the Opposition or independent candidates garnering more than 23 per cent of the votes. Apart from an independent candidate, the Opposition candidates were from the National Solidarity Party and the Democratic Progressive Party.

And this time round, most analysts TODAY spoke to reiterated that a multi-cornered fight hands the advantage to the PAP in what will essentially be a two-horse race between the PAP and the WP. They added that, to the layman, the Opposition is still largely seen as a homogenous bloc, and the presence of three Opposition parties will dilute the Opposition vote.

Former Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Zulkifli Baharudin said: "They (WP) have been trying hard to distinguish themselves from the PAP but they have not succeeded in distinguishing themselves from the other (Opposition) parties."

National University of Singapore Associate Professor Bilveer Singh added: "There are two simultaneous contests going on in Punggol East - PAP versus Opposition; and Opposition versus Opposition ... All things being equal, these types of fights disadvantage the Opposition.

"For many (voters), it is simply that a PAP incumbent has left. Now, should we install another PAP or non-PAP person, and this will be determined by a plethora of factors."

Agreeing, former NMP Siew Kum Hong noted that the RP and the SDA have yet to establish themselves.

"SDA and RP don't have much of a distinct identity in the public's mind. If SDP had run, for example, it could have been much more of an evaluation of each party on its own merit," he said.

The SDA and the RP were founded by former Opposition figureheads Chiam See Tong and J B Jeyaretnam, respectively. Mr Chiam left the SDA before the 2011 General Election while Mr J B Jeyaretnam died in 2008, and his son Kenneth took the helm.

Institute of Policy Studies Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh noted that each of the Opposition parties "has its story". However, in their current state, "it is probably going to be a big challenge for (RP and SDA) to brand and get their message out to win some mindshare among the residents of Punggol East, when compared to the PAP and WP", she added.

"They will need boots on the ground, solid messaging, and a clear promise of how they wish to serve the residents," she said.

In contrast to his opponents, PAP's Dr Koh will be making his political bow at the by-election. Both Ms Lee and Mr Kenneth Jeyaretnam made their debuts in the 2011 GE, while Mr Lim will be contesting his fourth election.

Analysts said that based on the results of past elections, Dr Koh's lack of experience will not be a big disadvantage, given the PAP's strong brand and party machinery.

Mr Zulkifli, however, stressed that the die is yet to be cast, despite the seeming advantage that the PAP holds in a four-way tussle.

"We are underestimating the intelligence and sophistication of our voters," he said. "We are not even sure how the election is going to play out, the kind of issues, how people respond ... at the moment there is no guarantee."

DPM Teo expects 'close fight'

In fact, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, who also entered politics via a by-election in 1992, said he expects a "close fight".

"What we need to do is to go out and reach out to as many residents as possible," he told reporters at the Nomination Centre.

Mr Teo had made his presence felt in the Hougang by-election held in May last year. Apart from Mr Teo who spoke at the rallies in Hougang, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also lent his support by going on walkabouts and sharing his views on the Hougang by-election with the media.

Responding to TODAY's queries, Dr Koh said the details have not been firmed up regarding whether and how the PAP big guns will be lending their clout to his campaign.

Nevertheless, Dr Koh began his campaign yesterday on his own, which comprised of block visits and a visit to Rivervale Plaza, where upgrading work had stalled for five months.

Citing past elections, including the Hougang by-election, Mr Siew noted that the extra firepower from the PAP's senior leaders could be a double-edged sword, given the need for Dr Koh to be seen as his own man. "It can be helpful but fundamentally it depends on what they (senior PAP leaders) are going to say," he said.

Mr Zulkifli felt that how much the PAP senior leaders lend their weight depends on how the hustings turn out. For instance, if national issues come to the fore, PAP ministers could be drawn into the fray, he said.

Analysts have said that they expect both national and municipal issues to be aired during the by-election, as the lines are blurred in Singapore where there is just one layer of government.