

'Lingering sentiment of dissatisfaction' made it a tough fight

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The People's Action Party (PAP) might have put the loss down to the "by-election effect" and municipal issues but analysts TODAY spoke to felt that, given the short span of time that had lapsed since the General Election (GE) in 2011, the lingering sentiment of voter dissatisfaction made this a tough fight to begin with for the ruling party.

The Punggol East by-election was held some 20 months after the last GE — barely enough time for the impact of the measures put in place by the PAP Government to address long-term national issues to be felt, they noted.

However, analysts were surprised by the Workers' Party's (WP) victory margin of more than 3,000 votes.

Singapore Management University political scientist Bridget Welsh said: "While some believed a WP victory was possible, the large margin is a surprise.

"It shows that the by-election reflected not just the demographic issues of the constituency but an extension of the national pattern of losses over the last two years."

On the by-election effect, where voters cast their vote for the Opposition in a one-off election knowing that the PAP will remain the ruling party, former Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Siew Kum Hong noted: "If people are happy with the PAP, they would still have voted for them."

He added: "It shows that the voters continue to be very angry at the PAP; even the Prime Minister stepping in to campaign could not make a difference. It is a barometer of how the PAP has fared in assuaging voters' feelings."

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had made an unexpected appearance as one of the speakers at the PAP's final rally.

Analysts also cited the slew of national initiatives over the past week, including the enhanced marriage and parenthood package, as well as new MRT lines and sheltered linkways.

Former NMP Viswa Sadasivan said: "The PM's entry in the final stages of the campaigning, and the announcements come across as political bargaining."

Associate Professor Welsh added: "A by-election always favours those with resources ... But people are not as interested in materialist rewards in this election."

While analysts felt that PAP candidate Koh Poh Koon did well for someone who spent only about two weeks at Punggol East, and came across as personable enough, it was not enough of an edge over WP candidate Lee Li Lian, who had been active in the Single-Member Constituency since 2011 and had the right characteristics.

“She was a woman, who was seen as a heartlander that people could connect to ... The demographics of the constituency worked in WP’s favour,” said Assoc Prof Welsh.

She gave the example of how, in the final days of campaigning, Dr Koh’s comments, captured in a video which spread online, portrayed him as being out of touch when he said that “everyone has a car”, and he and his wife own one each.

While municipal issues played a part — such as the stalled upgrading work at Rivervale Plaza — analysts said these were not major in determining the outcome.

Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh pointed out that while Punggol East is “not representative of Singapore by any means, but what it could be, is a harbinger of things to come”.

Dr Koh added: “A large part of Singapore is progressing, and they have a sense that they are a part of the middle class.

“When we did our survey at IPS, we found that the tendency to want a higher level of political pluralism increases at a higher level of socio-economic class.

“So people who tend to be in better housing — professionals — would tend to value the presence of the Opposition in order to keep the governing party lean and mean.”

What the PAP Government might have to do now is to ensure that impact from initiatives to address hot button issues — such as housing, transport and healthcare costs — are fully felt before the next General Election, which is due by 2016, comes around, analysts said.