

PAP to bank on Yaw factor?

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Today, 10 May 2012

As news broke yesterday that a Writ of Election has been issued for a by-election in Hougang, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reminded citizens in a posting on his Facebook page of former Workers' Party (WP) Member of Parliament (MP) Yaw Shin Leong's personal indiscretions, which led to the Hougang seat being vacated, and the WP's handling of the issue.

Mr Lee said: "I hope these events will not distract us from focusing on our national priorities and building an inclusive Singapore."

For those adept at reading tea leaves, Mr Lee's words not only gave a hint of the rationale behind the timing of the by-election but also the People's Action Party's (PAP) strategy in the contest for the WP stronghold.

Singapore Management University (SMU) assistant law professor and Nominated MP Eugene Tan said: "While it remains fresh on the minds of voters, the PAP will try to press home the Yaw Shin Leong issue. But while they will keep Yaw on the agenda, they will not overplay it. It will not be prudent for them to overplay it."

Former NMP Siew Kum Hong believes that the "Yaw factor" will be a major and "obvious strategy" for the PAP, as it calls for a referendum on the WP's performance since the watershed General Election last year — and this includes the Yaw episode.

The WP had booted Mr Yaw out of the party after he persistently failed to answer to the party leadership on rumours of alleged affairs.

Echoing Asst Prof Tan's view, other political analysts felt that the PAP will tread carefully on the Yaw issue during the campaigning.

SMU political scientist Bridget Welsh noted that "personal attacks reflect on the attacker as well", while Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Dr Gillian Koh pointed out: "Judging from the explicit responses from residents during the saga, they tended to be more forgiving of Mr Yaw."

Which is why they felt that the PAP could also shine the spotlight on the performance of the WP MPs so far.

While the by-election could be framed as a referendum on the PAP's performance since the GE last year, it could also be seen as a referendum on the WP — with its record number of MPs having been in Parliament for a year.

Said Mr Siew: "(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 Ms Sylvia Lim kept silent."

But Asst Prof Tan noted that such a tactic entails some risk. "The PAP has to be careful to not turn it into a referendum, as that's what the Opposition party will do," he said.

The PAP could also draw attention on what it has done since the GE. On a national level, the PAP could show how it has changed policies and taken citizens' concerns into account on issues such as housing and healthcare, said Dr Koh.

On the municipal level, it could talk about the work done by PAP candidate Desmond Choo, who has been working the ground since early last year, she added.