

Poh no-show, straight fight in Hougang

Lin Yanqin and Ng Jing Yng

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Despite his no-show, the spectre of Workers' Party veteran Poh Lee Guan and his actions a few days ago cast a long shadow on the Nomination Day proceedings yesterday.

Cutting a lonely figure, away from the WP members and supporters in the Serangoon Junior College Nomination Centre, Dr Poh was spotted a few blocks away.

Even then, he was the talking point, as his party comrade Png Eng Huat and People's Action Party candidate Desmond Choo were officially nominated as the two candidates in the by-election.

National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan, who was at the Nomination Centre to show his support for Mr Choo, questioned the WP's unity, after Dr Poh had taken the nomination papers for the by-election without the WP leaders' knowledge or consent.

Asked by reporters for his views on Dr Poh's run-in with his party leaders — which came days after former WP GE candidate Sanjiv Kamalasanan resigned from the party and publicly criticised its leadership — Mr Khaw said: "I'm not familiar with the issues within the Workers' Party, it sounds very complicated and it sounds pretty exciting, too, for people looking in. One by one, some resign, some get sacked, whatever the reason, some are unhappy with the leadership."

Referring to the PAP, Mr Khaw said: "For us, we come to politics to serve. So we have a common cause, you decide what is important for Singaporeans, and as a party we stay united."

"Of course, if you come in and you don't share our common goals, then it's very hard to stay together. Because if within the party you cannot stay united, can you imagine how do you run the country, some ministers are resigning or being sacked. I think that's very troublesome."

Mr Khaw also spoke about WP's former Hougang MP Yaw Shin Leong. "(He) got into trouble, disgraced himself and disappointed all the voters. And the worse thing is to leave just like that, without a word, not a single word of explanation or apology, I find that utterly irresponsible, and in fact arrogant," he said.

Speaking to reporters after nominations closed, WP chief Low Thia Khiang said the party would address the Yaw episode again during one of the rallies, "if there is a need to".

Mr Low quelled talk of disunity within the WP ranks. He said: "We operate an open platform for Singaporeans who are inspired to serve the people, (who) want to participate in politics.

"So after some time, if (the party members) leave the party to do something else ... I don't think we should stop them. I don't think we should take this as a split in the party."

Dr Poh, who was not carrying any nomination papers, insisted he was the "unofficial spare candidate", even as Mr Low separately told reporters that the party "had not planned any back-up".

Even though Dr Poh did not put himself up as an independent candidate — as many had expected him to — political analysts noted that the damage had already been done.

While they reiterated that the episode would have minimal impact on the by-election, it raises broader questions about the WP's ability to stay united.

Said Singapore Management University law professor and Nominated Member of Parliament Eugene Tan: "The pertinent question is, is the party able to maintain cohesiveness as it moves into the next General Election?"

He added that the incident has provided "ammunition" for the PAP to question if WP is a party that can be "relied on".

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said the recent departures of Mr Sajeev and Mr Fazli Talip - who contested last year's GE under the WP banner - also raised the issue of the Opposition party's selection process for cadreship and candidacy.

"It is however a party on the move and therefore has to make difficult choices about these issues, its strategy for further development and party branding," she said. "So such developments are not surprising as the party evolves."

Asked if the WP's reputation has been hurt by the kerfuffle over the past few days - and affect the outcome of the polls - Mr Low reiterated that Hougang's 20 years of confidence in the WP "won't be shaken so easily"