

Swing against PAP in Bukit Batok expected: Analysts

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TODAY, 8 May 2016

Given that the Opposition has an inherent advantage in by-elections, the vote swing against the People's Action Party (PAP) in the Bukit Batok by-election on Saturday (May 7) was expected, analysts said.

The political watchers TODAY spoke to had expected the ruling party's victory margin to be slimmer than the one in last year's General Election (GE), largely because of the "by-election effect", where the Opposition is seen as having an intrinsic edge because voters have the assurance that the Government would not change even if they were to vote for a non-PAP candidate.

The Bukit Batok contest saw PAP candidate, lawyer Murali Pillai, garnering 61.2 per cent of the vote, about 12 percentage points lower than the 73 per cent the party had won in the GE last September.

One political observer had, in fact, expected the Singapore Democratic Party's (SDP) candidate, Dr Chee Soon Juan — who won 38.8 per cent of the vote — to do better.

Apart from the by-election effect, the analysts also cited other factors that could have worked against the PAP in Saturday's polls: The ignominy of the resignation of the ward's former Member of Parliament David Ong, the effects of SG50 and founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's death wearing off, and the fact that it was up against Dr Chee, a high-profile Opposition figure.

Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie, from the Nanyang Technological University's School of Humanities and Social Sciences, said the by-election effect played a significant role in the swing against the PAP.

"There is a tendency for people not to worry about voting the PAP out of government. So there'll be a larger proportion of people than usual who would want to try a different party, a different candidate," he added.

Agreeing, Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) deputy director of research Gillian Koh said the Opposition has "a natural advantage" in any by-election.

Given this edge, and the fact that the SDP had fielded Dr Chee, its secretary-general, Dr Koh said she had, in fact, expected the party to fare better.

"I would have thought it would have been closer a margin than that," said Dr Koh, referring to the results of the by-election.

Others said Mr Ong's resignation over an alleged extramarital affair could also have had some impact.

Associate Professor Bilveer Singh, from the National University of Singapore's department of political science, said some voters, particularly religious and older ones, could have been "very unhappy" at being let down by Mr Ong.

In addition, Asst Prof Woo noted that the Republic was now further from events such as Mr Lee's passing and the SG50 celebrations last year, which might have worked in favour of the PAP in the GE.

"Those feel-good factors have ebbed away from the minds of voters for the moment," he said.

Also, Dr Chee's prominence as an Opposition figure and party chief could have also accounted for the vote swing towards the SDP. "Being the leader of SDP itself, he has some level of prominence, some draw in there," he added.

Despite Dr Chee recording his best electoral performance yet — and his party posting one of its best showings in a constituency since the 1991 GE, where it snagged three seats — some analysts said the Opposition party has to ponder seriously about its future, given that Dr Chee, 53, would be nearly 60 by the next GE.

Asst Prof Woo noted that because of Dr Chee's age, his electoral life cycle is "running out".

More broadly, the SDP, he noted, has not been very successful in leadership renewal compared with the Workers' Party (WP), which raises "serious questions" over the SDP's viability going forward.

Noting that SDP has not renewed its ranks with "credible, younger generations of potential candidates", Asst Prof Woo said: "Unlike the WP, it doesn't have people in their 40s, the likes of Daniel Goh, Leon Perera, Gerald Giam. (The SDP) doesn't seem to have that generation prepared, waiting in the wings to take over."

The SDP's showing in the Bukit Batok by-election is its second-best in any constituency since the 1991 GE, when it won three parliamentary seats.

In 2011, the SDP team that contested in Holland-Bukit Timah Group Representation Constituency won 39.9 per cent of the vote. Mr Cheo Chai Chen, its candidate in Nee Soon Central Single Member Constituency in 1997, received 38.7 per cent of the vote.