

Workers' Party expels Yaw Shin Leong

Party conveyed news to ex-MP's wife as he could not be reached PAP's Khaw accuses WP of 'U-turn', challenges party to 'come clean'

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As rumours of his alleged infidelity raged on over the past month, Hougang Member of Parliament Yaw Shin Leong chose to keep mum.

The married man's persistent silence, even with his party leaders, and a no-show at a meeting on Tuesday where he was invited to discuss the allegations, proved to be the final straw for the Workers' Party (WP) leadership: It announced yesterday it had expelled Mr Yaw with immediate effect.

The expulsion means that Mr Yaw, 35, has to vacate his Hougang seat and a by-election will be held at a date to be decided by the Prime Minister.

The expulsion came as a shock to most Hougang residents TODAY spoke to and drew fire from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and People's Action Party chairman Khaw Boon Wan. Mr Lee said that the WP "has let down the voters of Hougang" while Mr Khaw called on the party to "come clean".

Citing the fact that WP chief Low Thia Khiang had turned up at a Chinese New Year dinner in Hougang with Mr Yaw on Saturday, Mr Khaw questioned the "sudden U-turn".

"Is this an attempt at trying to conceal something they knew, first through silence, and then when they found it is not possible, then they get rid of the liability and blame everything on him?" said Mr Khaw.

In response, Mr Low told reporters that his party "has not let the people down". "Whatever is wrong, we put it right. That's all," he said. He explained he had attended the dinner in his capacity as a former Hougang MP. Mr Low pointed out: "Until a decision has been made by the party, we should respect the elected MP."

On Mr Khaw's accusation that WP did a U-turn, Mr Low said: "I don't know when he started to know we had a change in attitude. Is he our party member? Is he sure of our internal party matters?"

Earlier, at a 30-minute press conference at the WP headquarters — which was called at short notice — Mr Low and party chair Sylvia Lim read out prepared statements and took more than 40 questions.

A downcast Mr Low said the decision to expel Mr Yaw was "difficult and painful". Mr Yaw was seen as Mr Low's protege, succeeding him as Hougang MP in last May's General Election. Mr Low said it was a necessary "drastic" move — even if it opened up an opportunity for the PAP to wrest back Hougang, a WP stronghold for two decades — "so that the WP and its MPs can stand tall and hold (our) heads up to take the PAP Government to account".

“Although he has made his contributions to the party in the past ... we cannot compromise on the basic, fundamental principles which we believe in.”

Mr Low said its central executive council (CEC) had voted in “a clear majority” to expel Mr Yaw during the meeting on Tuesday, which was held after Mr Yaw had attended Parliament with his then-WP colleagues.

WP chair Sylvia Lim reiterated that the party “believes strongly in transparency and accountability, and expects no less from our party members, especially our Members of Parliament. By continuing not to account to the party and the people, especially the residents of Hougang, he has broken the faith, trust and expectations of the party and the people”.

Such behaviour “falls short of the standards we expect in terms of responsible behaviour”, especially of elected members, Ms Lim added.

It is also “only fair” for Hougang voters to have another opportunity to elect an MP, she added.

Ms Lim revealed that the party leadership only learnt of the accusations against Mr Yaw when the media approached them for comments. But because they had “very limited information”, the party was not in a position to address the substance of the allegations, she added.

Ms Lim stressed that the party was “not in a position to confirm or disconfirm whether the allegations are true or not”.

Last week, Mr Yaw voluntarily resigned as party treasurer. According to Aljunied GRC MP Pritam Singh, who is also on the CEC, the turning point which led to Mr Yaw’s expulsion was the media reports last Thursday alleging that Mr Yaw was involved with more than one woman.

Said Mr Singh: “With more individuals coming to the fore, we do not feel that keeping quiet was an option anymore.”

The last time Singapore saw a by-election was in 1992, where Marine Parade GRC saw a four-cornered fight.

Mr Low said the identity of the WP candidate for the by-election will be revealed on Nomination Day. Hougang residents will continue to be served by the WP until the by-election is called, Ms Lim said. The other WP MPs will cover the Meet-the-People sessions in Hougang and Aljunied-Hougang Town Council will continue serving residents.

Mr Yaw joined the WP in 2001 and rose quickly within the party ranks. At the 2006 election, he led what was dubbed a “suicide squad” of mostly political newbies against the Prime Minister’s team in Ang Mo Kio GRC and garnered one-third of the votes.

Last year, he successfully defended Mr Low’s Hougang ward with 65 per cent of the votes — the second highest overall.

On Mr Yaw’s expulsion, Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said: “WP wouldn’t have done this without some measure of confidence that they will hold the seat. But it

depends on who actually contests, whether WP can secure some kind of understanding among other parties as they did (in last May's GE) not to split the vote."

Singapore Management University political science don Bridget Welsh added: "They have taken a clear and decisive stand by making a clean break through the expulsion of Yaw Shin Leong. They are making it clear to the electorate that they are committed to being accountable to voters in an open way."

According to Ms Lim, the WP's decision to expel Mr Yaw was communicated to his wife as the party was unable to reach him.

Last night, reporters waited for hours outside Mr Yaw's home but to no avail. His Facebook page was not accessible and his mobile phone was switched off.