

WP's current phase of leadership renewal is complete, but we're not done yet: Low Thia Khiang

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Following the ascension of Mr Pritam Singh as the new secretary-general of the Workers' Party, the opposition party's "current phase of leadership renewal" — which was started in 2001 — is now complete, WP outgoing chief Low Thia Khiang said on Sunday (Apr 8).

In what was the party's first leadership change in almost two decades, Mr Singh was elected unopposed to the top post at WP's biennial Central Executive Council (CEC) election at its headquarters along Geylang Road.

Mr Singh, 41, who joined the party in 2010, was the party's assistant secretary-general before taking over from veteran politician Low, who has helmed the WP for 17 years.

Speaking to reporters at the end of the three-hour-long meeting, Mr Low said party renewal remains its "first priority", as he stressed that "a party without renewal (and) new blood will die a natural death in time to come".

But the party is clearly not done with injecting new blood, as Mr Low said that while he was pleased to see a younger team in place, with people prepared to step forward, he added that "renewal is never complete".

Mr Low said that the WP would need to continue to put in efforts to attract younger Singaporeans, such as those in their 30s, so that the "renewal process can continue and not dry up at the end of the day".

In November last year, long-serving party chief Mr Low, 61, made a surprise announcement at its 60th anniversary dinner that he would not contest the post of secretary-general at the party election.

Under Mr Low's leadership, the WP increased its number of parliamentary seats from one to nine, including three Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMPs).

He also led the party to a historic victory in Aljunied in the 2011 General Election, making it the first opposition party to win a Group Representation Constituency. Mr Low, Mr Singh, party chairman Sylvia Lim, Mr Chen Show Mao and Mr Muhamad Faisal are all Members of Parliament for Aljunied GRC.

When asked on Sunday about his role in the party and whether he would contest in the next General Election, Mr Low chose to keep his cards close to his chest, and would only say he would have to see how circumstances play out in future, and that it was "premature" to discuss such matters now.

Following the election, he stated that that the WP has now laid the "foundation to move forward to be the next alternative Government".

While it ultimately “depends on what Singaporeans want”, Mr Low said: “There’s (now) a possibility, compared to the past... I think that we are at least having the (foundation), but I’m not saying we are ready to be the next alternative government”.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

Political analysts and experts told TODAY that they expect Mr Low to remain in the wings of Singapore’s biggest opposition party.

Nanyang Technological University Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie believes that Mr Low will continue to play a “strong supportive role” as an advisor to the younger leaders.

“I don’t foresee he will step away so quickly, perhaps after an election or two, when he’s sufficiently confident that the next generation of WP leaders are able to carry the party through elections, before slowly stepping back...He’ll be around for a while,” said Asst Prof Woo.

Echoing his sentiments, Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan also said that he expects Mr Low to become more vocal both in and outside Parliament as his views would not be taken to represent that of the entire party, or implicate them.

Assoc Prof Tan added: “But Mr Low is not going to fade into the sunset or retire from politics anytime soon... In terms of political moves and strategy, he is probably one of the best in the game in Singapore, so certainly the party will want to continue to tap on him, and leverage on his experience and expertise.”

On the topic of renewing their ranks, Asst Prof Woo was of the view that Mr Low was referring to other “highly qualified and capable” members – besides Mr Singh – such as Mr Leon Perera and NCMP Daniel Goh. “People, in their eyes at least (who have), ministerial qualities”, he said.

“This has always been the criticism from the People’s Action Party (PAP) camp that (the WP) is not ready to form an alternative government... I think this is them trying to lay the foundations to counter that criticism.”

Post-CEC elections, Institute of Policy Studies deputy director Gillian Koh said there is a need for several senior teams within the WP to split the job and deal with matters such as the town council, and its ongoing lawsuit over the WP’s Aljunied-Hougang Town Council’s accounts, and to “take the party in a new direction”.

Drawing a parallel between the WP and PAP’s leadership transition and succession – albeit on different scales – Dr Koh said that the processes are similar, in that both parties need to “consolidate, send out a clear message about their direction, and then strengthen and go out and recruit”.