

HOT SPOT Potong Pasir SMC / Has Sitoh stepped out of Chiam's shadow?

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In Potong Pasir, it has never really been about clogged drains, the lack of an MRT station or even lifts that don't stop at every floor.

Instead, it has always been about personalities.

For 27 years, Mr Chiam See Tong of the Singapore People's Party (SPP) was Mr Potong Pasir.

In 2011, Mr Sitoh Yih Pin of the People's Action Party won the seat with a majority of 114. It was that close, and he beat SPP's Lina Chiam, Mr Chiam's wife.

Mr Sitoh, 51, has since worked to deliver on his promises, including Main and Interim Upgrading Programmes.

He had worked the ground for 15 years before winning the seat on his third try during the 2011 General Election (GE).

Retaining the seat won't just be about fulfilling upgrading needs. Mr Sitoh has to be the new Mr Potong Pasir to residents.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said: "Mr Chiam did rally the constituents together and while the estate was managed decently and lift upgrading was done without the need for extra funds from residents, which is truly admirable, it was Mr Chiam's national political role that was the most important."

Potong Pasir is the smallest electoral ward in Singapore today, with just 17,389 voters.

Resident John Liew, 54, said many Potong Pasir residents remain fond of Mr Chiam.

"I believe 70 per cent of voters here would still vote for Mr Chiam, should he decide to run again in Potong Pasir this GE," he said.

"But the candidate from SPP (Singapore People's Party) changed. With this, support also changed because we do not see the same level of commitment," the events production manager added.

On his part, Mr Sitoh knows he faces an uphill task winning over residents.

In an earlier interview with The Straits Times, he said: "It's very understandable because no matter what, Mr Chiam is a household name, the people are loyal to him and, like all things in life, change takes effort and time."

Dr Koh said Mr Sitoh has had four years to "truly over-deliver and seal the shift to the PAP".

"He would have had to do this by tending to the needs on the ground and provide enough infrastructural development, especially to the private estate dwellers who are more likely to support the idea that Singapore needs a vibrant opposition scene," she said.

Singapore Management University Associate Professor Eugene Tan added that Mr Sitoh is mindful of the "local knowledge" of his constituency and continues to "maintain the quiet rustic charm of sorts there".

"He wasn't going to change the character of the constituency since voters there are comfortable in their own skin.

"He knows that Mr Chiam has a very special position in the hearts of the residents of Potong Pasir, so he does not want to be seen as a usurper and has retained what is familiar," he said.

Prof Tan, who is a political watcher, said Mr Sitoh is signalling that he represents "change amid continuity".

"So voters need not fear that the kampong spirit in Potong Pasir is being diluted.

"Mr Sitoh is fully alive to the fact that Potong Pasir and Chiam See Tong were synonymous. This was Chiam's Potong Pasir for 27 years. Chiam is almost a legend there.

"Sitoh has a long way to go but it's not about whether he can live up to Chiam's legacy. Sitoh never will, given that he is from the ruling party," he added.

His Achievements

Mr Sitoh has laid the ground for his own legacy and is continuing to do so.

Gone are the days when residents had to take a bus to Toa Payoh to shop at a FairPrice supermarket, mail a parcel or visit a POSB branch.

These services were brought in by Mr Sitoh and figure prominently in the new annex of the community club that opened last year.

He has also set up a family service centre, more childcare centres and introduced initiatives to provide low-income families with food supplies and an education incentive award for students living in the ward. He even revealed that residents can look forward to a new bus service plying through Potong Pasir estate during peak hours in the mornings and evenings.

His deeds touched several residents, particularly the elderly.

Retiree Irene Ong, 62, said: "Mr Sitoh has worked hard to get covered walkways and lifts done, making it easier for the elderly and needy living here to move around.

"With the supermarket set up now, we don't have to go all the way to Toa Payoh or MacPherson to get groceries."

It has been four years to win a lot of ground. So the question is whether Mr Sitoh's hard work will help extend the slim lead he had in 2011.

"When you have won by only 114 votes the last time and you lost twice, you take nothing for granted. You have asked to put a percentage (to this). I would say it is a 50-50 chance," Mr Sitoh said when he announced his candidacy for GE 2015.

Prof Tan said Mr Sitoh is being cautious and it is "better to campaign on a humble footing and not tempt fate by putting Mrs Chiam as the underdog".

"Mrs Chiam has indicated that this GE will probably be her swansong, and that may just galvanise voters into giving her a last hurra," he said.

During the Nomination Day speech at Kong Hwa School on Tuesday, Mr Sitoh said: "Four years ago, I stood here, asking you to give me a chance. Today I stand here again. Please give me another chance. Please vote for me."

Also addressing the crowd, Mrs Chiam urged them to vote for the SPP. She added: "With one heart, as one town, let us walk into the future together."

Potong Pasir by the Numbers

Number of voters:

17,407

Types of homes:

62% public housing

38% private housing

Breakdown of flats:

41% are three-room or smaller

42% are four-room

17% are five-room or larger

2015 General Election

Candidates:

People's Action Party

Mr Sitoh Yih Pin

Singapore People's Party

Mrs Lina Chiam

2011 General Election

Voters in Potong Pasir:

17,327

People's Action Party

(50.36%)

Mr Sitoh Yih Pin

Singapore People's Party

(49.64%)

Mrs Lina Chiam

Issues

Lift upgrading, better facilities for the elderly, and amenities such as a supermarket and a post office — these were the community concerns brought up by the residents of Potong Pasir at the last general election.

They were promised and were fulfilled by former MP Sitoh Yih Pin, during the four years he was in office.

Now, with few to almost no municipal issues, the residents in the single member constituency are likely to focus on national ones.

These include the inflow of foreign labour, cost of living, housing affordability and improving public transport.

This was Chiam's Potong Pasir for 27 years. Chiam is almost a legend there. Sitoh has a long way to go but it's not about whether he can live up to Chiam's legacy. Sitoh never will, given that he is from the ruling party.

— Singapore Management University Associate Professor Eugene Tan