

More at stake than just one seat

Koh Hui Theng, Lediati Tan, Hedy Khoo, Denis Edward
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The date is set, the fight is on.

But will the issues that surface be national ones or constituency ones?

Will they be about housing prices or housing a new wet market as Hougang residents go to the polls in a by-election set for May 26?

Nomination Day is on May 16.

The single-member constituency seat has been empty after the Workers' Party (WP) fired Mr Yaw Shin Leong for alleged indiscretions in February.

Singapore Management University law lecturer and Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Eugene Tan said the Hougang by-election isn't simply a local contest to determine who's the better man to look after residents' needs.

Not when the entire country is watching the outcome.

He said: "National issues like the income gap and housing prices will have an impact on the municipal level.

"In Singapore, both the national and local issues come into play."

Former NMP Zulkifli Baharudin said the by-election isn't like the General Election.

"But I suspect some people may raise national issues to distract attention from Hougang," he said.

"It's not supposed to be this way. This is a local election at a municipal level."

He added that how it plays out will reflect the maturity of the electorate.

Wait and see

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said: "The campaign will focus on both the national issues and municipal issues, but let us see what particular angles they will take in the hustings."

Referring to the episode which led to Mr Yaw's dismissal, she said it will be awkward for WP to talk about the past.

Hence, they would want to shift the focus to something else.

She added: "(WP chief) Mr Low Thia Khiang's statement when Mr Yaw was expelled was very strategic.

"He spoke about how the party valued the support of Hougang voters and called them 'the vanguard of the democracy movement in Singapore'."

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday said: "I encourage Hougang voters to use this opportunity wisely, to elect the best candidate with commitment and integrity.

"Someone they can rely upon to express their hopes and concerns, address their needs and make a real difference to their lives."

At the Hougang Meet-the-People Session last night, Mr Low said the need to call for a by-election has shown residents in Hougang that they will not be short-changed.

He said: "If the MP is not up to the mark, WP is prepared to give them another opportunity to make another choice.

"This is what we stand for."

Several opposition parties told The New Paper that they would not be contesting, reducing the chance of a three-cornered fight.

Former presidential candidate Tan Jee Say announced that the best way forward "is for all to support WP in its defence of the seat against the PAP".

Refuting talk that he had been approached by WP not to stand, Mr Tan added: "I am sure WP will appreciate this gesture of political cooperation from individuals and other opposition parties alike, and will reciprocate accordingly in the run-up to the 2016 General Election."

The National Solidarity Party said it will not be fielding a candidate in Hougang.

Similarly for the Singapore Justice Party, its secretary-general Desmond Lim told TNP: "We have to put our differences aside to support the greater (opposition) cause."

Their decision was expected.

Said Dr Koh: "Given the tradition of co-operation between the opposition, they would want to avoid a three-cornered fight in Hougang."

"For another opposition party or member to make a bid for Hougang (would risk) upsetting the main opposition party today."

'Political posturing'

SMU's Prof Tan added: "Previous talk about keeping options open and contesting in the Hougang by-election was just political posturing.

"No other party has walked the ground since 1991. Besides WP and PAP, voters probably won't take other candidates seriously.

"They may even see them as opportunists."

Some Hougang residents were bemused by the by-election buzz.

Logistics officer Martin Zheng, 28, said: "I hope Mr Low will come back to run. He's the residents' favourite."

Failing which, he would like to see someone like Mr Low – "with good character and who is passionate about the people".

He added: "Someone who is very sincere, who will attend funeral wakes and birthday parties like Mr Low.

"Not someone who cares about the money, but who really wants to help meet people's needs."

For Mr Zheng, the by-election will be the third time he is voting.

The Hougang resident has lived there since 1991 – the year Mr Low became his MP.

He said any potential candidates should be able to speak Teochew.

It's "the key thing" – as Hougang has many Teochews and elderly folks who speak the language.

He added that the Yaw Shin Leong saga will not affect how he votes.

He said: "I felt the party did the right thing in giving (Mr Yaw) a chance to explain.

"He didn't explain, so the party had to do something about it."

An odd job labourer, Mr K. Ang, 60, who has lived in the estate for more than 20 years, said: "Hougang is Mr Low's own backyard... Hammer has a good chance here."