

Smaller crowd at WP rally

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The New Paper, 20 May 2012

One year on, Hougang voters find themselves back at the open field at the junction of Hougang Avenue 4 and Hougang Central.

But this time, the crowd appeared smaller.

Even the muah chee and ice-cream sellers who were there last year, noticed the difference.

"My sales tonight is not as good as last year's," the ice-cream seller who gave her name as Mei Lan, 48, told The New Paper on Sunday last night.

We also spoke with 30 people who attended the first Workers' Party (WP) rally. Only four were Hougang residents. Three others live in Hougang but come under Aljunied GRC.

Others came from as far as Pasir Ris, Woodlands and Jurong West.

"I don't live in Hougang, but I've come here to give support – my parents still live here," said former Hougang resident Adam Teoh, 36, a sales executive.

"I've been a resident of Hougang for some 20 years, and it is still very close to my heart. The people here are very warm and neighbourly."

Moulmein-Kallang GRC resident W.L. Ng, 30, a therapist, told TNPS that she was there as she was "curious" to find out whether the residents were "still loyal" to WP and "whether the People's Action Party (PAP) was doing its groundwork".

Ms Ng said: "I'm here to give moral support and see what they have to say."

So is the smaller crowd an indication that election fatigue has set in?

There was the General Election in May and then the presidential election in August. Now Hougang residents find themselves in the midst of a by-election.

All this in one year.

Dr Tan Ern Ser, faculty associate at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said the size of the crowd at the rally is an indicator, but not the only indicator.

He said: "It's not as hot as last year, though there still is a lot of discussion on blogs."

Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at IPS, added: "It cannot be compared to last year's General Election and presidential election when almost all Singaporeans had to pay attention to vote."

"Hougang has been important for the opposition movement in Singapore, hence the interest."

While Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan acknowledged that there was "still a fair bit of interest" in the Hougang by-election, he felt that Singapore might not be as "excited or engaged" as they were for the general and presidential elections since they do not have to vote, unless they are Hougang residents.

"In a sense, it (the by-election) is not going to change the composition of Parliament," said Prof Tan.

Hougang voters, who number 24,000, account for one per cent of Singapore's voting population, pointed out Ms Koh.

Last night, WP rolled out their big guns - Members of Parliament for Aljunied GRC, Mr Chen Show Mao, Ms Sylvia Lim, Mr Low Thia Khiang, Mr Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap and Mr Pritam Sing, who spoke at the rally.

But they avoided any mention of ex-colleague Yaw Shin Leong, the former Hougang MP whose resignation, and subsequent sacking from WP, sparked the by-election in the first place.

When it was Mr Singh's turn to speak, he focused on the issue of candidate selection.

Highlighting former members of the PAP who were jailed for different offences, he said there was no foolproof method of ensuring a candidate is without fault.

Without mentioning Mr Yaw's name, he said his party did the right thing when it discovered its member had misbehaved.

WP candidate Png Eng Huat reminded the crowd that Singapore's "fragile democracy" is under threat by the ruling party.

For instance, wards like Anson and Cheng San "held a special place in Singapore's history", but they disappeared when the electoral boundaries changed.

He also reminded young Hougang voters that their "parents sacrificed so much for the country".

For instance, even when the Government did away with a lot of bus services and the market, and dangled a \$1 million upgrading carrot in 2006's General Election, Hougang residents did not yield.

"You have proven that there is much more to life than money and free Teochew porridge," said Mr Png to a cheering crowd.

There was no mistaking who the crowd was there for. When Mr Low Thia Khiang, WP's secretary-general took the stage, the crowd roared.

Mr Low introduced Mr Png as a man of "integrity" and called on Hougang residents to give him a chance to serve them.

The stakes are high in Hougang, a WP stronghold. Until recent events, observers were sure WP would win easily.

The picture isn't as clear now, say observers. Dr Koh said: "WP has a 30 per cent lead."

"They've held the ward for 21 years, but given the circumstances the by-election has been called under, with some surprises from WP's past and current members, these could affect WP's lead, though by how much, we don't know."