

WP stakes early claim

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The Workers' Party (WP) has eliminated any guesses as to where it will be fielding candidates in the 2015 General Elections (GE).

In an announcement yesterday, WP chairman Sylvia Lim said the party will be contesting 28 seats — five Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) and five Single Member Constituencies (SMCs).

Making its battle plans known early was seen by some political analysts as "unusual".

But experts were divided on whether it was truly a surprise or whether it was an expected move.

Political observer P.N. Balji told *The New Paper* yesterday: "WP has always held its cards close to its chest. So this is a surprise... It is signalling to other opposition parties to leave these seats alone."

WP's intentions came fairly quick given that the electoral boundaries review committee's report was released on Friday afternoon.

There are a total of 89 seats in 13 SMCs and 16 GRCs.

WP said it will be eyeing five GRCs — Marine Parade, Aljunied, East Coast, Jalan Besar and Nee Soon.

Also in its crosshairs are five SMCs — Hougang, Punggol East, Fengshan, MacPherson and Sengkang West.

But WP's announcement was hardly unexpected, said Dr **Gillian Koh**, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

In the past, others had made their intentions of where to contest known, as in the last GE.

Dr Koh said: "... There has always been an understanding that the different (opposition) parties will recognise where each of them contested in the past and try to respect each others' turf, so to speak."

WP's readiness to contest in more areas may also be a logical move given its previous performance in the political arena.

Added Dr Koh: "With the breakthrough in GE 2011 and the two successful by-elections, I'm sure there has been quite a lot of talent that has been attracted to WP. So this move probably says they (WP) have the talent and therefore the confidence to stand in this many places."

Another political commentator is of the view that WP's intention of contesting 28 seats, which does not even make up one-third, is in line with the party's desire for incremental change in a changing political landscape.

The move can also be regarded as pre-empting possible criticism by others for not "putting their cards on the table".

Associate Professor Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University, a former Nominated MP, said: "It's a realistic way for WP to manage voter expectations. The party is not making aggressive promises but is saying, let's field 28 good candidates."

"This is a way to improve WP's political branding."

A scenario that any opposition party would want to avoid is being entangled in a three-cornered fight.

In the 2011 GE, People's Action Party's Michael Palmer faced two rivals — Singapore Democratic Alliance's Desmond Lim and WP's Lee Li Lian — for the Punggol East single seat.

In the only three-cornered fight in GE 2011, Mr Palmer got 54.5 per cent of the votes while WP's Lee got 41 per cent.

Said Dr Koh: "Where there are two very strong parties, it is really quite unwise to be the third."

Meanwhile, other opposition parties appear to be keeping their options open before deciding on a strategy.

At a walkabout in Tampines, National Solidarity Party acting secretary-general Hazel Poa told reporters that the party will be extending an invitation to other opposition parties to meet on Friday.

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