

Members who resigned, were expelled 'no big deal' for Progress Singapore Party: Tan Cheng Bock

TODAY, 22 May 2020

Progress Singapore Party (PSP) secretary-general Tan Cheng Bock on Thursday (May 21) addressed recent reports of members who had resigned or were expelled, saying that their departures were "no big deal" to the one-year-old opposition party.

There have been people with "big egos" who joined PSP out of self-interest, instead of contributing to Singapore's development, said Dr Tan in an outreach session streamed live on Facebook on Thursday night.

"I believe in giving everybody a chance to join our party," Dr Tan said during the video conference.

"Over time, we realised that some joined expecting what the party can do for them... We want the people, when they come and join the PSP, to do something for the country and not for themselves."

There have been reports of two members resigning and another two members expelled from PSP in the last two months.

Among them are Mr Ravi Philemon, who resigned from the party last week and former vice-chairman Michelle Lee who left the party in March. Former party member Daniel Teo was expelled from PSP earlier this month, as was former member Jan Chan in March.

Responding to a question from the public on the seemingly "high" turnover of PSP members, Dr Tan said: "If those people who come in to join the PSP, hoping to extract something from the party for themselves, I think even if they leave, I will not feel sorry."

Dr Tan said that there were some party members who had "big egos" and believed that their way of doing things was the "only correct way".

"But we have party discipline. We have party ways for allowing people to come and express their disappointments and dissatisfaction."

"But when they have big egos, it is very difficult. When their egos get hurt, they react very negatively," he said.

He also said that PSP has more than 1,000 members, and having between 20 and 30 people resign was "no big deal".

"To me, it's no big deal. Currently, there are so many waiting to join us," said Dr Tan in a session where he also appealed to viewers to join the party.

Besides Dr Tan, eight members of the party also answered questions from the public in a Zoom meeting to reach out to residents in the west of Singapore.

They included assistant secretary-general Leong Mun Wai, vice-chairwoman Hazel Poa and PSP members such as workplace safety senior trainer Abas Kasmani, marketing executive Jeffrey Khoo, lawyer Wendy Low and law undergraduate Choo Shaun Ming — who at 22 years old was the youngest on the panel.

Dr Tan also said that while PSP has been through "a lot of pain", it has learned from the challenges it faced and grown in the process.

"Any young political party has to go through this, even the PAP (People's Action Party) when they started, there was a lot of infighting, there were a lot of problems. But they overcame it."

The PSP was established in March last year.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said the recent developments at PSP can be seen as "growing pains of the newest kid of the block".

"The jostling for influence within the party is not unexpected and par for the course as the party firms up its line-up of candidates, its choice of constituencies to contest in, and the party's overall electoral strategy," he said.

"It appears that the jostling was rather intense, extending to some members engaging in inappropriate means to further their goals."

On May 12, Mr Philemon quit after being implicated in a video made by a former PSP member, who claimed that the party had received foreign funding. The PSP member who made the video, Mr Teo, was expelled from the party on May 1 and PSP has refuted the allegations.

Police reports were made over the video and Mr Teo issued public apologies to Mr Philemon and other opposition politicians mentioned in the video.

In March, Mr Chan was reported to the police after posting religiously insensitive comments on Facebook and was later expelled by the party.

Former vice-chairman Ms Lee resigned in March. The party said in a statement then that she had left to spend more time with her family and refuted rumours that Ms Lee was asked to leave.

Political analyst Gillian Koh said that such developments can be seen as a "natural process" that takes place with new political parties.

"When the Reform Party was first formed, there was a similar pattern of people joining and then people leaving especially as the General Election in 2011 drew near," she said.

Back in 2011, the party founded by Mr Kenneth Jeyaretnam saw a mass resignation of nine members, including current PSP vice-chairwoman Ms Poa. The former civil servant in the Administrative Service contested under the National Solidarity Party (NSP) in 2011 and once headed NSP, but quit before the 2015 General Election.

Dr Koh said there will also be members who join to "get a feel of the leadership and their political positions".

She added that the issues of discipline, with police reports made, were quite unusual, but that the expulsions could also be put down to PSP being a young party: "It is a balance between growth and control, and the need for establishing norms and codes of discipline.

"In the PSP case, some former members are known entities, and others, fresh faces. This means it is more difficult for the party leadership to establish what their backgrounds are,

how competent they are, or, in the realm of more sinister scenarios and possibilities, how trustworthy they might be.”

Some of those who joined PSP, such as Ms Lee and Ms Poa, were former members of other opposition parties, while some were new to politics — including Mr Teo.

However, such negative news could still result in “some liability to the PSP brand”, she said.

On the flip side, the party has been swift and consistent in dealing with cases of party discipline, said Assoc Prof Tan.

"That has done much to reduce damage to the PSP. In fact, it may even be regarded as good handling of potentially debilitating issues for a new party," he said.

Political observer Derek de Cunha told CNA that while the expulsions and resignations “do not have a good look” for the PSP, it is still too early to say if they will be of significance at the ballot box.

"Between now and when the poll actually takes place, any number of events can intervene to shift the electoral advantage one way or another," he said.

"The main concern of the vast majority of Singaporeans has always been their material well-being. To what extent would their material well-being have declined — in terms of retrenchments, a sizeable cut in wages, and actual or paper losses in investments — under the weight of the Covid-19 pandemic even if circuit breaker restrictions have eased or are fully lifted, will be a key factor in the upcoming General Election."

Singapore's next election has to be called by April 14, 2021.