

Why new or smaller opposition parties continue to join the fray despite crowded scene: Analysts

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- More opposition parties contested GE2020 despite predictions of consolidation
- Analysts said that incentives remain for new or smaller parties, such as NCMP seat
- Red Dot United said that low-cost nature of GE2020 partly explains the party's entry
- Analysts added that smaller and newer parties will have to find ways to stay relevant

When opposition parties failed to make a dent at the ballot box during the 2015 General Election (GE), analysts predicted that the smaller outfits would consolidate or reorganise to hold their own against the big guns.

At the time, with the exception of the Workers' Party (WP), the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) and the Singapore People's Party (SPP), all other opposition parties registered less than 30 per cent of the vote share at the constituencies where they stood.

Yet, for the GE this year, the number of opposition parties has grown — from eight in 2015 to 10. There were six in 2011.

Their showing at the latest polls has also been fairly successful, with the opposition parties registering close to 39 per cent of the overall vote share. None of the parties, except one, lost their election deposits in the constituencies they contested.

Candidates need to garner a minimum of 12.5 per cent of the vote to avoid forfeiting the S\$13,500 deposit.

The sole party to lose its deposit was Peoples Voice, which scored 12.18 per cent of the vote in a three-way fight in Pasir Ris-Punggol Group Representation Constituency (GRC). Mr Cheang Peng Wah, an independent candidate, also lost his deposit in a three-cornered fight in Pioneer Single Member Constituency (SMC).

Even newcomers Red Dot United, which got its registration approved just two weeks before Nomination Day, was able to secure about 25 per cent of the vote in Jurong GRC.

TODAY looks at why opposition parties continue to enter the fray despite bigger parties dominating the scene, and if predictions of an opposition consolidation will come to pass.

INCENTIVES TO CONTEST

Political analysts said that there are still incentives for new opposition parties to form, even as more established outfits strengthened their foothold in the political scene.

Dr Gillian Koh from the Institute of Policy Studies pointed to the provision of 12 Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) seats, which give opposition candidates an opportunity to be an NCMP even if they lost.

In this GE, the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) headed by former People's Action Party (PAP) Member of Parliament Tan Cheng Bock was able to secure two NCMP seats in its first showing at the elections.

With this GE campaign mostly taking place online, the cost of taking part was also greatly reduced.

Ms Michelle Lee, Red Dot United's chairman, said that had GE2020 been a conventional election, the month-old party would have struggled to raise enough money to fund the cost of holding physical rallies.

CONSOLIDATION STILL THE WAY FORWARD?

Political commentator Eugene Tan said that with a crowded political landscape, it is harder for the smaller parties to remain relevant.

Assoc Prof Tan, who is a law professor at the Singapore Management University, believes that consolidation, such as through a formal coalition, a loose alliance or a merger with other parties, is one way forward as this would allow them to pool resources.

However, the coalition members have to set aside individual party and personal interests to create a successful alliance, he added.

Some opposition parties interviewed by TODAY said that they would continue to push for a coalition in the lead-up to the next GE.

Mr Goh Meng Seng, the secretary-general of People's Power Party (PPP), said that without any "star candidates", having a bigger-sized coalition would help to inspire voters' confidence in the parties. It will also help smaller parties such as his gain greater media exposure, he added.

An attempt by PPP to form an opposition bloc with the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA), PPP, Reform Party and the now-disbanded Singaporeans First failed to materialise during GE2020 after SDA pulled out.

However, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) secretary-general Mohamad Hamim Aliyas remains optimistic that an opposition alliance between his outfit, PPP and Reform Party can be formalised and registered within the next year.

Having lobbied for an alliance among several opposition parties two years ago, Mr Lim Tean, the leader of Peoples Voice, is no longer keen on the idea.

While he had thought at first that it would be good for the opposition parties to come together, Mr Lim said the "selfish interest" of individual parties meant that opposition unity remains a far-fetched idea.

"I now believe that instead of pursuing a fruitless cause for opposition unity, it is better that we work towards a multi-party democracy in Singapore, which is what is happening throughout the world. We can get more diverse views, and diversity is what Singaporeans want," he said.

SMALLER PARTIES HAVE TO 'RAISE STANDARDS'

Coalition talks aside, analysts said that the smaller opposition parties will have to raise their standards to stand out from the crowd.

Dr Felix Tan, associate lecturer in international relations at SIM Global Education, said that these parties need to groom members and candidates instead of coming across as "fly-by-

night” entities. They will also have to be less antagonistic in their messaging and appeal to voters rationally instead.

Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt Abdullah of Nanyang Technological University’s School of Social Sciences said that the smaller parties should also consolidate their resources to contest in either one GRC or SMC to achieve a breakthrough like the WP did in 2011.

These parties should also be clearer about what they stand for, rather than what they stand against.

So long as the bigger opposition parties such as WP lack the resources to contest every seat in an election, there will continue to be space for smaller opposition parties, Asst Prof Walid said.