

WP ignores SDP's overtures

Latter makes public three emails it sent inviting former for talks on polls

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The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) yesterday announced that the Workers' Party (WP) has turned down its invitation for talks to, among other things, prevent a three- or multi-cornered fight in the Punggol East by-election.

The SDP also made public three emails it had sent to the WP -the first of which was sent on Tuesday, while the last was dated yesterday and signed by SDP Secretary-General Chee Soon Juan.

In the email yesterday, which was addressed to WP Chief Low Thia Khiang, Dr Chee wrote: "We hope to explore ways on how we can offer the best candidate with the best opportunity to defeat the PAP. The SDP would like to work with the WP to avoid a three- or multi-cornered fight with the PAP.

"More importantly, we would like to see how opposition parties can work closer together in the interest of unseating the PAP to bring about a democratic system in Singapore."

Analysts interpreted SDP's publication of its emails as trying to pressure WP to make way in Punggol East. But the emails - which urge opposition parties to work together - have ironically showed up cracks among the opposition parties, they said.

National University of Singapore Associate Professor Bilveer Singh said: "What is happening in the opposition camp demonstrates the general lack of unity and the main reason why the opposition has been unable to make strides in Singapore politics since 1965 - they divide themselves and give the PAP the advantage".

The fact that the Punggol East seat was vacated after a PAP MP, Mr Michael Palmer, resigned over an extramarital affair meant the opposition started out with an advantage. But due to "strategic blunders", the by-election "has now become an issue of opposition" unity, Assoc Prof Singh said.

He added: "However, if the opposition can develop some sort of pact, it will not only give it a strong chance of winning (the by-election) but, more importantly, signal to the public their rising maturity as political actors."

Singapore Management University Assistant Professor Eugene Tan said the SDP was "also trying to show that it is a stalwart of Opposition unity and the WP is a laggard in this regard". "Ironically, by publishing their correspondence with WP, it is almost certain that the meeting will take place without the WP represented," Asst Prof Tan noted.

Institute of Policy Studies Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh added: "It also demonstrates SDP's approach to campaigning, party management and relationship with other parties - direct and assertive."

Asst Prof Tan felt that it was unlikely that the WP will step aside. Its candidate in the General Election, Ms Lee Li Lian, garnered 41 per cent of the vote in Punggol East. Mr Palmer won with 54.5 per cent of the vote.

He added: "We should not hold our breath that the WP will not contest in the by-election. The WP views the other opposition parties as intruding in what is, rightfully, their turf."

The SDP's first two emails to the WP were signed by SDP Chairman Jufrie Mahmood, and addressed to WP Chairman Sylvia Lim.

The first email was sent on Tuesday, a day before the by-election was announced. It proposed a meeting this Saturday, "to explore the possibility of one opposition party contesting against the PAP in the by-election".

On Wednesday, after the by-election was announced, Mr Jufrie sent another email, asking Ms Lim to bring the meeting forward to today. "However, we received a reply from Ms Sylvia Lim that gave no indication of WP accepting our invitation," the SDP's website said.

SDP did not publish Ms Lim's reply, which prompted Dr Chee to send the third email. Attempts yesterday to contact the SDP and WP for comments were unsuccessful.