

Singapore's Ruling Party Braces for By-Election Test

Chun Han Wong

The Wall Street Journal, 10 May 2012



Women walk past a campaign banner from the People's Action Party on their way to a polling station during the Singapore general elections in May 2011.

Bloomberg

The gauntlet is thrown. Singapore's ruling establishment will face this month its third poll fight in just over a year, after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Wednesday called for a by-election that could shape up to be a referendum on government policies made in the wake of a bruising general election last May.

On paper, the vote matters little for the ruling People's Action Party and its legislative agenda—it will fill just one vacancy in an 87-member Parliament, in which the PAP holds 81 seats compared to just five for the Workers' Party.

But symbolically, analysts say the result may be seen as a scorecard on the government's performance in tackling high living costs, infrastructural failings and a widening gap between rich and poor—concerns that haven't eased despite policy steps taken after the PAP's slimmest-ever general election win last year, and an unexpectedly heated presidential race in August, which the government's favored candidate barely won. The government's measures include steps to cool a buoyant housing market, boost low-end incomes, and slow the inflow of unpopular foreign workers.

The by-election—Singapore's first since 1992—is set for May 26, when more than 23,000 voters in the Hougang ward will pick a new parliamentarian to replace Yaw Shin Leong of the opposition Workers' Party, who was dismissed by his party in February for failing to answer questions about accusations of marital infidelity. The contest is likely to feature just the PAP and the Workers' Party, as other opposition groups have declined to participate.

“Over the past year, the government has worked hard together with Singaporeans to implement its program to build an inclusive Singapore... (but) much work remains ahead,” Mr. Lee said in a statement on the by-election. “I encourage Hougang voters to use this opportunity wisely, to elect the best candidate with commitment and integrity,” he said.

Mr. Lee had in February postponed a decision on whether to hold a by-election, citing pressing national issues. The move invited accusations that the prime minister was dithering on the issue and sparked vigorous public debate over Mr. Lee's constitutional authority over by-elections.

Those concerns compelled a Hougang resident, Vellama Marie Muthu, to ask Singapore's High Court to order a by-election to be held within three months of Mr. Yaw's dismissal or a

“reasonable” time frame, arguing that Singapore law doesn’t give Mr. Lee “unfettered discretion” on when to fill a parliamentary vacancy. Analysts say that Mr. Lee’s move to call the vote has taken the sting out of a potential court ruling on the matter, even as debates continue on the legal limits of the prime minister’s powers over by-elections.

“The prime minister’s advisers must have made the case that it might be best to get this by-election over and done with at this early stage of the electoral cycle, instead of letting it hang in the air as an unresolved issue,” political analyst Derek da Cunha said.

The PAP has a poor record in Hougang, failing in four attempts to retake the ward after losing it to the Workers’ Party in 1991. Its candidate for the by-election, National Trades Union Congress executive Desmond Choo, lost his first foray in the ward last May by a hefty margin, taking just 35.2% of the vote against Mr. Yaw’s 64.8%. Mr. Choo will face the Workers’ Party’s Png Eng Huat, a businessman who lost his parliamentary bid in a different district last May.

“It’s not just a strong lead that the PAP has to erode, but a huge depth of history that the Workers’ Party has had there,” said Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore’s Institute of Policy Studies.

Regardless, “there are no indications that the PAP has lost its appetite for power. To that extent, it may use this by-election to indicate that it will put up a very robust campaign,” Mr. Da Cunha said.

In past years, the PAP successfully sued opposition politicians and critics for defamation and directed personal criticisms against opponents on the campaign trail—tactics that some residents say discouraged a robust opposition and made it harder for smaller-party candidates to compete in elections. PAP leaders say they welcome debate and file lawsuits only to protect their reputations, and many political observers have noted the government appears to be trying harder to improve its engagement with citizens and critics, albeit with mixed results.

“The manner in which the PAP conducts its campaign is as important as the actual by-election result,” Mr. Da Cunha added. If the ruling party resorts to some of the same tactics it used in the past, “it would disappoint all those who expected greater political and social liberalization after last year’s general election.”