

GE2015: What will become of Potong Pasir?

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In 2011, the day after the People's Action Party's Sitoh Yih Pin defeated Lina Chiam of the Singapore People's Party in Potong Pasir by a mere 114 votes, she and Chiam See Tong went back to the estate to thank the residents.

And the residents of Singapore's smallest electoral ward, with a mere 17,389 people, were overflowing onto the narrow streets of the estate. Chanting his name over and over again, they shook his hand and hailed the bent, frail figure of a man who had been their Member of Parliament for an entire generation.

It feels remarkable to think that hundreds of people had come to cheer two losing candidates. Chiam had left Potong Pasir to contest in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC, leaving his wife to contest the ward.

Four years on, much has changed. There's still a small town, almost kampung, feel in Potong Pasir, with its distinctive small provision shops and sloping roofs. But there is finally an NTUC FairPrice in the estate, not to mention a SingPost, a POSB bank and an expanded community club with a gym.

There are also new lifts that stop at every floor, covered linkways and more than 100 extra parking spaces. All of which serve as a stark contrast to the town Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong once labeled a "slum", and which repeatedly refused the carrot of upgrading from the PAP.

Residents that Yahoo Singapore spoke to all expressed happiness at the new amenities. Kathleen Fong, a retiree in her 60s, says even outsiders have taken notice, "I took a cab and the driver was saying, your town looks much better now. Give him some time, I think Mr Sitoh can make it even better. "

But even though Sitoh will be defending the seat that he won on his third attempt, the memories of Chiam's 27-year run (1984 – 2011) as Singapore's longest serving opposition MP remain strong.

"Mr Chiam had to rely on himself entirely. When he met the residents, he didn't even have a suitable office. He had to put a table at the void deck," recalls retiree Lim Seow Hock, 64, in Mandarin.

Mr Lim, who has been living in the estate since 1985, says, "He couldn't get financial help from the government. When he applied for funds for the estate, they wouldn't be approved."

"He is a really good man," adds his wife Sally Tan, 61, also a retiree.

But Associate Professor of Law at Singapore Management University Eugene Tan, feels that the Chiam effect is "weakening".

"Four years have passed since the last GE when Chiam decided to move to contest in a GRC, and so the loyalty to Mr Chiam has also dissipated somewhat. The loyalty to Mr Chiam need not necessarily be transferred to Mrs Chiam," says Prof Tan.

To many observers' surprise, Potong Pasir has remained a Single-Member Constituency, rather than be absorbed into a Group Representation Constituency. Noting that election boundaries are set by the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC), senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies Dr Gillian Koh, reckons that this gives the incumbent Sitoh an opportunity to prove himself.

Dr Koh says, "If it were absorbed into a GRC, the contrast might not be so clear. You need to be able to see a before and after. So it's a chance for Sitoh to prove if he has indeed been able to cater to the residents' needs."

But while she is pleased with the upgrading of the estate, lawyer Cynthia Tang, 33, feels that the heart of Potong Pasir is still "not so pro-PAP".

"I think the inclination of the people, they like being a little bit of a renegade sort of place, I get that sense," she says.

Tang, who has been living in the estate since 2011, adds, "Things which people take for granted in other constituencies have only been given to them in the last three to four years. I'm sure along the way, they cannot be feeling all warm and fuzzy towards the government for that."

So what of Sitoh's opponent Lina Chiam, who will be contesting the estate again? Residents seem less than convinced about her.

Insurance advisor and long-term resident Rachel Loh, 58, feels that Mrs Chiam lacks the "X-factor". She says, "I don't think I have confidence in Mrs Chiam. I don't think she's good at politics, I don't think she can handle it. She's so different from her husband."

And it is not just about upgrading. Younger residents, like investment professional Eugene Seo, 33, recall Mr Chiam's active role in raising national issues in parliament, and want to see their MP doing the same. He says, "I would feel more comfortable with a candidate who has that depth in terms of local issues and national issues. I expect a lot out of our politicians."

Dr Koh agrees that this is a priority for Potong Pasir residents, noting the longevity of Chiam's leadership.

"Because the voters lived with Mr Chiam for so long, who didn't promise upgrading but promised to be their voice in parliament, it's clear that Potong Pasir residents also value that role. By the fact that they supported Mr Chiam for 27 years, a good many of them were prepared to support that ideal," says Dr Koh.

But perhaps the ward itself may not be around for much longer. Prof Tan sounded a note of warning that if Sitoh does retain his seat, it may well be the last time that Potong Pasir is an SMC.

He notes, "It may well be absorbed into a GRC at the next electoral boundaries review. As it stands, it has about 17,000-odd voters -- this is the smallest SMC and way below the 28,500 voters to 1 MP threshold that is used for delineating electoral boundaries."