

Chee Soon Juan's image problem

Simon Vincent

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ENTER: Chee Soon Juan driving his daughter to school, as a tender piano score plays in the background.

Then, a shot of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) leader's pensive reflection in the rear-view mirror.

"I understand your worries. I know your hardship. I see your pain. I know because I've listened to you. I know because I've spoken with you. I know because I live among you," says a Dr Chee in the background of the "You're Not Alone" Bukit Batok by-election campaign video launched on 21 April.

In the video, Chee is seen greeting Singaporeans and telling them to "have a nice day". The whole set-up is mawkish and aimed at humanising – again – a politician with an image problem.

The persistence of memory – distorted or not

A day after the video went out, Lina Chiam, wife of veteran opposition politician Chiam See Tong said on Facebook that she and her husband would "like to clarify that Dr. Chee did not seek nor receive permission to include Mr Chiam's image" in the recent issue of the SDP's newsletter, *The New Democrat*.

The most telling sentence was: "Mr Chiam has not given his endorsement to any candidate for the upcoming Bukit Batok by-election." It spoke volumes in its terseness.

As Singaporeans would know, Chee has been accused of ousting Chiam from the SDP and taking over the party. Chee has, along with other party members, disputed this claim.

Whatever the truth may be, this much is certain: The Chiams' words reignited the controversy.

When asked about the statement, Chee told reporters: "I just want to be able to focus on this campaign and what we can do for Bukit Batok. Everything else is just a distraction. And if we ask people it's just not helpful to them when they go about their daily lives."

It's a fine response. However, in his battle for hearts and minds, too much of Chee's persona is tied to a line of footnotes about his chronic image as a practitioner of confrontational politics and, at worst, an unhinged personality.

The line, it appears, is a fuse ready to be lit at any moment from both sides of the political divide, opposition and, naturally, the establishment.

On 18 April, former Prime Minister and current Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong - in a blatant attack - resurrected the infamous loudhailer incident in which Chee shouted at him in public. The context for Goh's Facebook post, oddly, was a *Business Times* article that was re-released as part of the publication's retrospective Top 40 section.

A respite

In the 2015 General Election, a hitherto largely unknown side of Chee was on display. Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Tan Tarn How argued in an article for IPS Commons that the “resurgence and embrace” of Chee had a large part to do with social media.

Tan pointed to the “Behind the Man” video released on 31 August 2015 and the number of views it generated. “This short video has gone viral with over 255,000 views on (filmmaker Tay Bee Pin’s) YouTube channel, as of 8 September. The comments left by views are largely supportive,” he wrote.

The video, he said, humanised Chee. “In the past, before the era of social media and against the backdrop of a compliant mainstream media, it was difficult for him to channel these aspects of himself – or any other sympathetic messages – directly to people and for them to share it quickly and widely with others.”

Given the “filtered lens of a mainstream media with largely only one perspective”, Tan said it was difficult to know if Chee is a different man today than in the past, or whether he was truly a confrontational politician.

Quite astutely, he pointed out that “we do not know what the original man was like”.

Flogging a dead horse

This question is becoming less and less important, as Chee’s problematic image has persisted up to the upcoming Bukit Batok by-election.

During the GE2015 hustings, Chee’s fellow candidates almost always mentioned how badly the image of Chee has been skewed. In the build-up to the election, “Teacher Thinker Rebel Why”, a book edited by SDP candidate Jaslyn Go, was released. It contained accounts of Chee from various segments of society and essentially served as a corrective on Chee’s image.

In her essay, “Chee Soon Juan: The Barbarian at the Gate or a Gadfly”, Constance Singam indicates that, through its control over Singapore’s sociopolitical norms, the People’s Action Party (PAP) has engineered a docile citizenry, averse to a diversity of views, and cast Chee as a troublemaker.

Linking Webster’s definition of a gadfly as a “person who stimulates or annoys especially by persistent criticism” and Socrates’ reputation as a gadfly in the service of truth, Singam casts the SDP leader as a tragic hero.

Whether Chee has truly suffered from being grossly misinterpreted matters little, though, as old controversies get raised in his new skirmish with the PAP’s Bukit Batok candidate Murali Pillai.

The fact of the matter is that a gadfly lurks around Chee himself. It pokes at his current veneer and reminds people that perhaps an unscrupulous man lurks beneath.

Politically speaking, the truth of the gadfly's buzzing has become secondary to the viability of Chee at the SDP's masthead.

As Chee and his party members, in turn, respond to aspersions cast on his image, they indicate that his rehabilitation is a dead horse being flogged.

If Chee loses the Bukit Batok contest, despite the advantage of the by-election effect, the SDP might have to re-evaluate its leadership.