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Four candidates, two-horse race?

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PUNGGOL EAST BY-ELECTION

Four candidates, two-horse race?

EUGENE K B TAN



Much is at stake for the four political parties contesting the Punggol East by-election. The stakes are different for each party but matter significantly to each. As such, the next eight days of campaigning will be critical in winning the voters' hearts and minds.

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As it is a tight race, we can expect a robust contest. Regardless of how the parties seek to characterise the by-election, it will be fought on both local and national issues.

National issues often have local manifestations, and local concerns often reflect national priorities and policies. The party that is able to adequately address both sets of issues will gain traction with voters.

Although it is a four-cornered contest, the race will effectively be a two-horse race. The Workers' Party (WP) and the incumbent People's Action Party (PAP) are the main contenders. The by-election is a battle, a way station for them as they move towards the next General Election (GE), which promises to be the real watershed election.

While both parties have sought to downplay the significance of the by-election, the reality is that much will be read into how they contest, the eventual outcome and what it means for them going forward.

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A BIG GAMBLE

The Reform Party (RP) and the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) are

taking a big gamble by contesting. This should not be surprising. Yet, their contesting is seen as having the potential to hurt the WP's prospects.

Their challenge is to ensure that their candidacy is not seen as being opportunistic and that they have something substantive and different to offer. Otherwise, they run the premature risk of sleepwalking to political irrelevance and ridicule.

The RP and its candidate, Mr Kenneth Jeyaretnam, are new to Punggol

East, and the snap election does not aid their cause as time is limited for them to build rapport with the voters and demonstrate their commitment.

The SDA's Desmond Lim is seeking to redeem himself after a dismal showing in the May 2011 GE. However, it is hard to see how different voters will view his electability in a short span of 20 months. Mr Lim had then polled 4.45 per cent of the votes and lost his electoral deposit.

Both the RP and the SDA may well



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be undermining their long-term political aspirations should they perform poorly at the polls.

The reality is that, in a crowded race that this by-election is, voters — especially Opposition supporters — are mindful that should their votes split, they will be handing victory to the PAP. In such circumstances, as was demonstrated in the 2011 GE, Opposition voters are likely to pool their votes behind the candidate who they regard as being the strongest Opposition candidate. As such, the possibility of Mr Jeyaretnam and Mr Lim losing their electoral deposits is high.

WHAT IS AT STAKE

The WP has much to gain by securing a famous victory in Punggol East. A victory will not only increase its parliamentary headcount to nine Members of Parliament (MPs) but will bolster its credentials as the leading Opposition party and will put them in good stead for the next GE.

The WP's campaign will focus on its role as a check on the PAP Government, and how a healthy Opposition parliamentary presence will improve Singapore's governance and make the Government more responsive. But the WP also has to deal with the perception in some quarters that it has not lived up to its billing as the leading Opposition party based on the parliamentary performance of its MPs thus far.

This by-election may well function as a referendum of sorts on the WP's performance. The party will have to show that another WP MP will do the job better than an MP from the RP or the SDA in order to persuade non-WP Opposition supporters to vote for it instead.

The PAP has the most at stake in this contest. The last time the PAP fielded a fresh face in a Single-Member Constituency was in 1988. Not only will it need to secure victory, it must also ensure that the party secure more than 50 per cent of the popular vote. Anything less than the magic figure of 50 per cent would mean that the victory is more fortuitous than real; that victory was by way of the Opposition vote being split.

As the outcome of this election will not result in a different government, the PAP will need to show why its candidate, Dr Koh Poh Koon, can make a qualitative difference by being its 81st MP. The PAP will need to impress and assure voters that Punggol East is valued.

Will the party's big guns take a low profile or will they campaign without undercutting Dr Koh's determination to run his own campaign? They will need to show how a victory is important in the larger scheme of things. How the PAP calibrates its campaign is crucial.

Fundamentally, this by-election underscores the central importance of representation in our system of government. And the candidate who is able to show he or she will be an effective and efficient representative of Punggol East will gain traction on the ground, and secure a famous victory for his or her party.



The Punggol East by-election is a battle, a way station for the PAP and the WP going into the next General Election in 2016, which promises to be the real watershed election. TODAYFILE PHOTO

1988
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