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Both sides will need to raise their game

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Citation

EUGENE, Tan K. B.. Both sides will need to raise their game. (2012). *Today*. 10-10.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol_research/3770

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Both sides will need to raise their game

EUGENE K B TAN



Now that the Hougang by-election is over, the Workers' Party (WP) and the People's Action Party (PAP) will conduct their post-mortems.

Among the key questions would be how they campaigned and how they can deal with the issues that the hustings threw up.

For the WP, how can it keep Hougang in its fold and grow the famed "Hougang Spirit"?

How can it be less reliant on its charismatic leader Low Thia Khiang?

For the PAP, how can it make significant gains and be more competitive in Hougang?

VIBRANT POLITICAL SYSTEM

The PAP was not expected to win in Hougang, a WP stronghold since 1991.

The WP victory last Saturday, despite a nearly 3-percentage-point drop in support when compared with the

May 2011 General Election (GE), is nonetheless a continuing and strong endorsement of the WP.

The WP's national-issues approach as well as its "Towards a First World Parliament" battle cry resonated well with the voters.

The WP read the ground sentiments well and connected with the desire among Singaporeans for a more open, competitive and vibrant political system.

Ironically, this aspiration is tied to the ruling party's emphasis on good governance. Coupled with a nascent growing political consciousness, Singaporeans have internalised that good governance requires more than just performance legitimacy.

A one-party dominant system, while facilitating effective and decisive government, is also perceived to be inherently fragile since the likelihood of a systemic collapse is greater should the dominant party become inept, corrupt or insensitive.

As the WP's political stock rises, it will also have to deal with the reality that there will be political ambitions and dreams to attend to within its own ranks. These "growing pains" are inevitable, and internal contestation and dissent will have to be managed.

SHOWCASING ITS STAND

With six elected Members of Parliament (MPs) and two Non-Constituency MPs, the WP must endeavour to make the best use of the parliamentary platform to showcase what it stands for and demonstrate how it can grow beyond being a check and balance.

As such, it is not enough to merely ask pointed questions of the Government. Increasingly, it should move motions in Parliament and demonstrate its ability to dissect government policies.

More than that, it needs to demonstrate that it can also propose viable policy alternatives.

This is a tall order, notwithstanding that it does not have the backup of a bureaucracy. But the WP cannot have its cake and eat it.

The great value proposition in providing alternative ideas is that it demonstrates that the realm of policy options is not confined to, and should not be defined solely by, one party's world view. It will also engender healthy debate and result in more robust policymaking and implementation.

MAKING POLITICAL POINTS

The WP would also have to demonstrate that it does not seek special treatment and condone in what I call banal acts of lawlessness.

For instance, the WP did not end its by-election rallies on time and overran by 10-15 minutes.

It would be extremely challenging for the police to intervene to ensure that the rules governing the issue of the rally permits are observed.

Further, in launching a stinging attack on the mainstream media for being a "political tool" of the PAP's election campaign, the WP did not adequately substantiate its case.

Not only was this an attempt to capitalise on the by-election victory to make political points, the WP was also effectively asking the media for nothing but favourable coverage of its party and its candidates.

As the WP feels hard-done enough to promptly raise these matters after the election results were announced on Saturday, the WP should follow through and raise these and other important issues in Parliament.

Given that Mr Low has urged Singaporeans to develop a "First World Society", his party must demonstrate that it treats Singaporeans in similar fashion. And voters must demand from the WP the very same standards it requires of the PAP.

SENSE OF UNFAIRNESS

For the PAP, it needs to radically relook its approach to Hougang.

In particular, the PAP government needs to address the deeply-felt sense of unfairness in some of its policies, such as estate upgrading and the electoral system.

The upgrading incentive, in its various guises ranging from being an explicit electoral threat to carrot to a subtle promise of change, has not worked at all.

Instead, it offends the sense of fairness and equity, and this has worked to the detriment of the PAP.

Similarly, there is also the need to rethink the current policy of not appointing Opposition MPs as the advisers to the grassroots organisations (GROs) of their constituencies.

The justifications proffered by the People's Association are unconvincing, and undermine the good work done by the GROs.

As it stands, the GROs' adviser in an Opposition ward needs to endorse the upgrading plans prepared by the Opposition town council.

The current arrangement results in the PAP being accused of punishing Opposition wards through denying them estate rejuvenation.

Let the Opposition MPs be fully in charge. They will then be held responsible and will have to measure up to voters' expectations.

BETTER POLICYMAKING

Where the electoral system is concerned, a source of unhappiness relates to how electoral boundaries are drawn. The electoral boundaries are often redrawn without adequate explanation. A maturing electorate will not accept such acts of *fait accompli*.

The "new normal" has become a powerful meme in local political discourse. But it must result in the PAP and the Opposition alike raising their game, resulting in better policymaking, a more engaged and committed citizenry and enhanced social cohesion.

What the PAP and the Opposition do between now and the next GE will provide a firmer indication of the direction and substance of political change in Singapore. The next GE, which will have to be held by January 2017, might well be the real watershed election.

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