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Battle for undecided voters in Hougang

Amid promises of clean fight, rivals stick to scripts for the hustings



EUGENE K B TAN

Although the power equation in Parliament will not be altered in any meaningful manner whoever wins the Hougang by-election this Saturday, a key concern for both parties is not so much the final result but how well they will do at the ballot boxes.

This is where the battle for the undecided voters will be crucial, with two days of campaigning left.

The hustings have been marked by the contrasting campaign styles of the Workers' Party (WP) and the People's Action Party (PAP).

The PAP has been determined in its characterisation of the by-election as a local election. Its candidate Desmond Choo has portrayed himself as an "alternative voice" and an independent representative of Hougang voters.

On the other hand, the WP has resolutely reprised its General Election 2011 strategy

and campaigned on the local-national nexus.

In addition, the WP has emphasised the need for a "First World Parliament" through a more competitive political landscape. The party argues that this will ensure that the interests, concerns and needs of Singaporeans will be better represented than in a one-party-dominant system.

Last weekend, responding to the WP's call to keep Hougang a "bastion of democracy", Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who is also the PAP's secretary-general, argued that "real democracy" is about choosing the party and candidate that can best serve the voters.

TIME TO LOOK TO OWN NEEDS?

The WP campaign operates on a broader canvas by appealing to the political altruism and loyalty of Hougang voters.

But given that the by-election will not fundamentally change the composition of Parliament, the aspirational imperative of keeping Hougang in WP's fold may have less traction with the undecided voters.

Some questions such voters may ask include: Why should Hougang voters

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continue to bear the "national burden" after two decades? Should not Aljunied GRC, with its complement of five WP Members of Parliament (MPs), now bear the mantle?

While the by-election has not seen any significant electoral "carrots" (such as upgrading promises) by the PAP, their "local issues" approach reminds Hougang voters that they should now pay more attention to their own concerns as well as domestic matters in their constituency.

To counter this, the WP needs to campaign in a more nuanced manner, contextualised for a by-election.

IS EACH HIS OWN MAN?

The second major contrast between the PAP and WP relates to style and approaches.

The WP's campaign has seen WP secretary-general Low Thia Kiang, who held the Hougang seat between 1991 and last year, being prominent in the campaign. At times, his prominence appears to overshadow that of the WP candidate Png Eng Huat.

To be sure, Mr Low is well liked by Hougang voters, who voted him into Parliament four consecutive times. But the WP must be mindful that Mr Png is its candidate for Hougang and he needs a higher profile and be seen to be up to the task of being its MP.

Mr Low, after all, cannot serve both the voters of Aljunied GRC and Hougang to similar effect and commitment.

The active campaigning by the WP's MPs for Mr Png stands in contrast to PAP's Desmond Choo, who has emphasised that he is his own man and will be an "alternative voice" if elected.

Besides Nomination Day, Mr Choo's campaign only saw PAP leaders and some MPs lending support over the weekend. For instance, Mr Lee accompanied Mr Choo on his walkabout on Saturday and highlighted his contributions and initiatives in the past year.

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The PAP is consciously seeking to calibrate the right level of support by party stalwarts in view of their trying to focus voters' minds on the local election.

UNWANTED DISTRACTIONS

The WP's campaign has seen unwanted distractions in the form of unsolicited, unilateral interventions by its past and current members.

Dr Poh Lee Guan's "spare tyre back-up" plan on the eve of Nomination Day was not only unconvincing but also raised concerns over whether the WP, as a growing political party, can keep pace with the ambitions and aspirations of its members.

Former Hougang MP Yaw Shin Leong, whose expulsion from the WP triggered the by-election, broke his silence when he made his so-called apology last Friday.

However, Mr Yaw's media statement did not help the WP's cause, since it did not corroborate the party's claims that it did not know about, and had acted decisively over, Mr Yaw's alleged discretions.

THE NCMP ISSUE

The WP's campaign has also been dogged by apparent divisions within the party. The most recent, and potentially the most damaging, relates to Mr Png's *Channel NewsAsia* interview on Monday that he had taken his name out of the ballot when the party was selecting its second Non-Constituency MP (NCMP) nominee last May. The minutes of that meeting (whose authenticity

was confirmed by the WP last night) were emailed anonymously to the media on Monday night.

The minutes contradicted Mr Png's claim. He sought to clarify at a press conference on Tuesday morning that his choice of words used during the interview may have been ambiguous and apologised for the confusion.

Coming on the back of other distractions and keenly aware that this issue could unravel the WP's eventful campaign, WP MPs Low and Sylvia Lim made a stout defence of the NCMP fiasco at last night's rally.

But nagging questions over the WP's assertions of it being a disciplined and cohesive party characterised by accountability, integrity, and transparency may persist as the campaign draws to a rapid close.

A CLEAN, IF SUBDUED, FIGHT

The PAP has realistically appreciated it is the underdog and that it has an "uphill fight" in Hougang.

In the May 2011 General Election, the WP won Hougang with a comfortable 30-percentage-point margin. The PAP would be encouraged should it be able to increase its popular vote share this Saturday. A vote share of 40 per cent and above would be a significant inroad into the WP's electoral crown jewel.

For the WP, it still enjoys its political honeymoon from GE2011 and it is likely to be contented if it can retain the seat with at least 60 per cent of the valid ballots cast.

Despite the keen contest, both parties have not quite substantively

engaged each other on their campaign platforms, preferring to stick to their scripts for the hustings. This is not surprising, since both parties are not quite prone to histrionics and vitriol and had pledged a "clean fight".

The WP seeks to canvass public opinion that it is a constructive political force as it grows politically. The PAP is keen to assert that its post-GE2011 governance is not business as usual. Consequently, the hustings are somewhat subdued, even as both parties are mindful that the by-election might be treated by some voters and Singaporeans as a referendum of sorts.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

After a politically eventful year last year, one detects an accent of political fatigue creeping in. The fact of the matter is that the political stakes are not so high in this by-election.

Sure, the WP has more to lose in the by-election. While the stakes are calibrated differently in their first head-to-head contest since GE2011, the parties must remember that this by-election is but a "battle" only.

Instead, the PAP and WP would do well to stay focused on acquitting themselves well in the long haul before the next General Election. The priority for both parties is to not lose the "war" for the hearts and minds of Singaporean voters. The Hougang by-election is a good place to start. ■

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