

Cracks widen in SDP as PAP's legal action sinks in Chee, supporters say top panel backs decision not to apologise but two leaders distance themselves

Aaron Low

The Straits Times, 23 April 2006

MORE signs of cracks in the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) have appeared under the weight of legal action from People's Action Party (PAP) leaders.

When SDP chief Chee Soon Juan visited Chong Pang market in Yishun yesterday, party members Ling How Doong, Wong Hong Toy and Kwan Yue Keng were conspicuously absent.

Yet Dr Chee and his supporters yesterday maintained that the central executive committee (CEC) of the party backed the decision not to apologise to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew over comments published in the party's newsletter.

SDP supporter Yap Keng Ho, a close ally of Dr Chee, said the party met from 11pm on Friday to 2am yesterday to thrash out differences on the legal action.

He said: 'The party members are all behind Dr Chee. We are sticking together. If we apologise, people will throw eggs at us.'

Mr Ling, the party's chairman, and Mr Wong, the assistant secretary-general, said they were not at the meeting. While Mr Kwan did go for the meeting, he expressed surprise that the party had decided not to apologise.

'The last I met the council, I thought it was clear that no decision was made yet. But I will meet them once more before I decide what to do,' he said.

Both Mr Ling and Mr Wong indicated that they will pursue their own course of action and not necessarily follow Dr Chee's lead.

They refused to elaborate, saying only that they had yet to decide on what they would do.

'The deadline is Tuesday, so there is still time to decide,' Mr Ling told *The Sunday Times* at his office in Chin Swee Road.

As to why they were not in Chong Pang, he pointed to the stacks of files in the office. He was preparing to move out as he would be retiring as a lawyer at the end of the month.

The PAP lawyers have indicated that they would sue all 12 CEC members individually, besides the party and the printer, if they do not apologise by Tuesday.

This means each person would have to say sorry in a newspaper advertisement, pay damages and indemnify the two PAP leaders for any costs incurred.

With Dr Chee yesterday were five other CEC members - Ms Chee Siok Chin, Mr Christopher Neo, Mr Mohamed Isa Abdul Aziz, Mr Francis Yong and Mr Gerald Sng Choon Guan.

The signs are that Mr Ling, 70, and Mr Wong, 69, are estranged from this relatively younger core group. Both have not been seen in Dr Chee's company during walkabouts since the start of this year.

Despite being re-elected as party chairman in June last year, Mr Ling has not been to CEC meetings since last month, sources said. There were 'several' such CEC meetings in the past month, the sources added.

As for Mr Kwan, he told The Sunday Times that he has retired from 'active politics' and has not attended any SDP meeting since the middle of last year.

When asked, Mr Ling did not deny that he had fallen out with Dr Chee, who has declared he would take the route of civil disobedience, or deliberate law-breaking, to change politics here.

Last month, he told reporters that Dr Chee had focused on human rights issues while voters tended to look at bread-and-butter issues.

Mr Ling, Mr Wong and Mr Kwan would not be drawn into saying how they felt about being threatened in their individual capacities with legal action.

As far as Mr Ling was concerned, the show must go on. He pledged to continue campaigning for the Bukit Panjang single-seat constituency. 'I don't see why not. Life goes on.'

aaronl@sph.com.sg

'Election is not carte blanche for people to say things to slander people that are not true. So when they say something like that, they open themselves for a libel suit. And in this particular case, it's been published openly, they have made certain statements which are considered libellous, they have slandered Prime Minister and Minister Mentor, and I think the suits have been filed and they will have to answer it ... The timing is really not determined by PM and MM. It's determined by when the statements are made. I presume the statements in the publications were out only recently.'

- MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT MAH BOW TAN, telling reporters that elections do not give 'carte blanche' or 'blank cheque' for slander, while speaking to reporters after launching a photo exhibition of winning entries by Tampines residents and MPs at Tampines Linkway Mall.

'The SDP has said that it will bring up the NKF issue and that it will draw out a larger case around that.'

So, they were attracting a lot of attention to themselves in that way. I suppose this is not an unexpected outcome of that, given what we know of how the Government and the PAP view things like that, especially during election time, if a challenge of that nature is not managed carefully.'

- DR GILLIAN KOH, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies 'I'm not surprised. You can look at the past track record of when MM Lee and other PAP members acted against the opposition. The leaders' actions have not been frivolous.

The SDP wrote the article with the election in mind. Therefore, if PM and MM take legal action and the timing of this action punishes the opposition politically, that is to be expected.'

- MR ZULKIFLI BAHARUDIN, political observer and former Nominated MP

'The only surprise is that usually these defamation suits come after the election is over. So I think the fire of the SDP has been taken out.'

- MR SINAPAN SAMYDORAI, President, Think Centre

'I hope the enthusiasm for politics and political discourse would not be affected too severely.'

- MR CHANDRA MOHAN NAIR, lawyer and former Nominated MP

'It is always unpleasant and unhealthy to have legal suits, especially during elections. It creates an atmosphere which does not help the development of Singapore's political process. That I would presume everybody agrees with. On the other hand, I also recognise that anyone whose character and reputation are being defamed, has the right to seek redress. How to balance it? I think the parties concerned will have to give careful consideration to the matter.'

- WORKERS' PARTY CHIEF LOW THIA KHIANG commenting on the PAP's legal action against the SDP

Copyright © 2005 Singapore Press Holdings. All rights reserved.
Privacy Statement & Condition of Access.