

Why PAP is raising the stakes in Hougang, Potong Pasir

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IT IS not just about two seats, it is about strategy. Political observers said that the ruling party's move to get Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong to anchor its campaign in the Opposition strongholds of Potong Pasir and Hougang, was linked to its opponents' growing ambitions.

The Opposition has indicated it could contest as many as 57 of the 84 seats in this election. The People's Action Party's (PAP) has responded by seeking a clean sweep. This move will force the opposition's two top leaders to focus on defending their own wards before they dream of venturing out further, the observers said.

Said political scientist Dr Ho Khai Leong: "The PAP is now focusing on the Opposition wards, putting them as top priority. As for the other challenges, they will be met head-on as they come."

A political punter, who preferred to remain anonymous, said: "My own feeling is that the PAP really wants to win Potong Pasir and that they can win it."

Singapore Democratic Alliance chairman Chiam See Tong held on to his ward for the past 25 years by a whisker of 52.4 per cent of the votes ?or a margin of 751 votes ?at the last elections.

Added the observer: "It may be harder to win in Hougang because of the larger losing margin. But by putting the pressure on Hougang, the PAP is thereby keeping Low Thia Khiang within his ward, preventing him from helping the Workers' Party in other wards they are contesting."

Mr Low held on to his ward by 2,188 votes. Conversely, former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin thought the Senior Minister's special assignment reflected the PAP's confidence that there would be no contest in Marine Parade GRC ?and that Mr Goh's personable public image would help swing votes.

Breaching opposition strongholds would also continue the trend of PAP improving on its performance in each successive election recently. The opposition held four seats in 1991 which was cut to two in 1997. Though that number did not change in 2001, the PAP notched up an increased share of the vote.

Said Dr Ho: "It is possible that if the 75 per cent win of Mr Goh's 2001 election campaign cannot be matched, then clinching all the seats would be a significant indicator of Mr Lee Hsien Loong's strong mandate."

Another reason for the salvo, according to Institute of Policy Studies senior

research fellow Dr Gillian Koh, would be a signal to the opposition that even if they won new wards, the PAP could always win them back ?there is no such thing as an impregnable opposition stronghold.

However, Dr Koh said there is a risk to this move.

"If it is pitched as a contest between Mr Goh versus Mr Chiam and Mr Low, can the PAP and Mr Goh afford for the strategy not to work?" she said. Mr Goh, on his part, has already made it clear that he is not the candidate and that the battle is being fought by Mr Sitoh Yih Pin and Mr Eric Low, who are being fielded in these wards.

Analysts generally concurred that Mr Goh had political cache as a former prime minister with a consultative image.

Still, should the PAP make a clean sweep of all seats, it will do so with no apologies.

Said Mr Zulkifli: "The PAP has accepted that the elections are open and fair, and should they win all the seats it will reflect the wishes of the people. There is no need to be shy about winning all the seats."

The PAP governed with a 15-year monopoly on Parliament from 1968 to 1981 until then WP leader J B Jeyaretnam ended that.

PAP candidate for Hougang Eric Low said: "Even if all the MPs come from one party, as long as it best delivers the goods then I don't think there's anything wrong with that."

Pointing to the system of Non-Constituency MP and Nominated MP in Parliament today, Mr Low said: "There are already enough avenues in place for dissenting voices to speak up. I think it is very gracious of the government to do this to accommodate the ground."

Introduced in 1984, the NCMP scheme allows the highest-scoring losers in a general election to enter Parliament if there are fewer than three elected opposition MPs.