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Members of the public light candles around a portrait of the late Lee Kuan Yew as a tribute to him, Friday, March 27, 2015, in Singapore. Lee, 91, died Monday at Singapore General Hospital after more than a month of battling severe pneumonia.

Photographer: Wong Maye-E/AP Photo

Lee Kuan Yew's parliamentary seat, which takes in part of Singapore's financial district and Orchard Road shopping belt, is set to be contested for the first time in 27 years following his death.

Opposition groups such as the Reform Party and Singapore Democratic Party plan to run in the next national election in the five-seat district called Tanjong Pagar. The area stretches across south-central Singapore and includes two of the most expensive neighborhoods for luxury condominiums plus the downtown casino resort. A ballot is expected later this year, say political analysts and opposition leaders.

The death of Singapore's first premier on March 23 at 91 marks the end of an era for Tanjong Pagar, a district he represented for six decades. Lee's grip on the ward in what was initially an older, working class neighborhood reflected his impact on the Southeast Asian nation for a quarter of a century after he stepped down as premier in 1990.

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“Opposition parties may find it an uphill task to make headway there because of the feelings of gratitude and respect for Mr. Lee that many constituents have,” said Jack Lee, an assistant law professor at the Singapore Management University.

More than 100,000 people lined the streets in pouring rain to bid farewell to Lee on March 29, capping a week of mourning where more than a million people waited for as long as 10 hours to pay tribute to him at Parliament House and other sites.

Less Willingness

The next election must be held by January 2017 but is widely expected to be sooner to capitalize on the 50th year since modern Singapore’s founding, with major celebrations planned around National Day in August. The current parliament, which began on Oct. 10, 2011, has a maximum term of five years. Elections are required within three months once it is dissolved.

The ruling People’s Action Party, or PAP, which Lee co-founded in 1954, has seen its support eroded amid a backlash against immigration and rising living costs. The party won by the smallest margin since independence half a century ago at elections in 2011 and lost a multiseat ward for the first time.

“While Singaporeans respect and honor the memory of the late Lee Kuan Yew, they are also acutely aware that the present generation of ministers are coming up with policies that make life very stressful and tough for them,” said Chee Soon Juan, who heads the SDP. His party is keen on contesting Tanjong Pagar.

Of the current 86 elected members of parliament excluding Lee, 79 are PAP lawmakers and the rest from the Workers’ Party. There are also three opposition members who secured the largest share of the losing vote, and nine appointed members meant to represent community views.

Special Election

A special election isn’t required under the constitution for multiseat wards when a seat is vacated due to death, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s spokeswoman Chang Li Lin said in an e-mail. Lawmakers took on added duties when two parliament members in other districts died in 2008, Chang said.

“Given LKY’s status, there will be less willingness to hold a by-election,” said Bridget Welsh, a senior research associate at National Taiwan University’s Center for East Asia Democratic Studies. “The government will build on the national mood for a general election rather than a by-election.”

Tanjong Pagar was last contested in 1988, when it was a single seat ward, before Lee created multimember wards. That system requires parties to field as many as six candidates, where at least one needs to be of a minority ethnicity. All candidates in such constituencies must be from the same political party, or all run as independents.

Changing Dynamics

Lee first won his seat in 1955 with 78 percent of the vote in a three-way fight. In 1957, a by-election was held as Lee accepted another assemblyman’s challenge to resign and seek re-

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election as a test of public support. Lee secured his seat with 68 percent of the vote in another three-way battle.

Those who have stood against him in elections included businessmen, lawyers, a bookseller and school principal. One was jailed in the 1970s for criminal defamation and trying to incite violence against Lee. Tanjong Pagar, where the PAP was uncontested, had an electorate of 139,771 in 2011, and includes the Pinnacle@Duxton, a public housing development with seven towers linked by rooftop parks.

“Dynamics have changed nationally and in Tanjong Pagar,” said Chia Ti Lik, secretary general of the Socialist Front which withdrew its plan to stand in 2011 including in Lee’s ward. Still, “the accolades that MM Lee received in his passing is a phenomenon that can’t be dismissed by the opposition in its evaluation of the electorate’s sentiment,” he said, referring to Lee’s position as Minister Mentor until 2011.

Housing, Transport

Lee had dangled benefits such as upgrades for older housing estates to appeal to voters, and said people in opposition-held wards would have to wait “at the end of the queue.” In 2011 he said voters in the eastern district of Aljunied who didn’t pick his party would have “five years to live and repent.”

Lee’s son, the current prime minister, later apologized at a PAP rally in the financial district for not moving faster to address shortfalls in housing and transportation.

“The PAP has used threats of withholding of public housing upgrading and transport links to intimidate voters,” said Kenneth Jeyaretnam, head of the Reform Party. “The people must have a choice. We’ll certainly contest the ward if no one else is going to do so.”

‘Visibility Walkabout’

Singaporeans First, which was formed in August, has done a “visibility walkabout” in Tanjong Pagar and may contest the ward depending on how electoral boundaries are redrawn ahead of the vote, according to its chairman Tan Jee Say, who was principal private secretary to then-Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong from 1985 to 1990.

“I think people want to see contests in the constituency because they have not voted in 27 years,” he said.

Tan’s party wants to remove the goods and services tax and reduce Singapore’s dependence on low-skilled foreign workers. The Reform Party would provide cheaper lower-income housing, universal health insurance and introduce a minimum wage, while the SDP has laid out an economic plan that includes reinstating an estate tax for the rich and removing “tax haven practices.”