

Speakers at PAP conference address areas of dissatisfaction

By S Ramesh | Posted: 02 December 2012 1919 hrs



SINGAPORE: Several speakers at the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) Conference spoke of ways the party can move forward and tackle areas of dissatisfaction.

The party's defeat in Aljunied GRC was also addressed, with one branch chairman declaring that while it's an uphill task, victory is not impossible.

The PAP's cause has not changed, Central Executive Committee (CEC) member Chan Chun Sing.

These are to serve Singapore and its citizens, ensure the country continues to thrive, and work for a better life for all.

But he emphasised that these challenges cannot be left to the party leadership alone.

Mr Chan said: "We, as the new generation, will similarly need to earn the trust of our generation. We too have to go to each street corner and cyberspace corner to convince people of our cause; share with them our circumstances and choices and win them over to our vision and values. We cannot expect trust in the founding generation to be transferred to us without effort.

"Party activists never had it easy. As the saying goes, the only easy day was yesterday. Each generation will have our fair share of challenges. Each of us in our own way must be able to defend what we do. If we don't, or if we are unable to do this, we lose the trust of our people.

"For example, many say COE prices are high. Why are they high? Should we bring down the COE prices? Can we bring down the COE prices? How to do so? Why should we have or not have a COE system at all? Same of HDB prices. Foreign workers. Seemingly simple questions. But if we cannot answer them when challenged, we lose credibility. People lose faith in us as party members, who supposedly have more privileged access to the discussions and rationale for various things. People will wonder if we can even help them," Mr Chan shared.

Political watchers said reaching out to the middle ground is also a challenge.

Political analyst Zulkifli Baharudin said: "For the PAP to capture the middle ground, the PAP must also transform itself so that it becomes more relevant and I think that is difficult because while it requires the PAP to transform to attract the larger number of people who can provide the strong base for political support, the PAP also needs to transform itself in manner that it doesn't give the impression that it is not winnable, that it has lost its way, while it changes dramatically, the core that it is still a winnable party must be retained."

Associate Professor Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, who is MP for Nee Soon GRC, said: "I believe that the middle class plays a crucial role in driving the heart of our nation's social, economic and political processes. They are one of the drivers that represent the main psyche of Singaporean society. Often referred to as the "sandwiched class", they are perceived as not getting adequate "goodies" during the annual budget but remains a group with ever-increasing aspirations. In their pursuit of building a better future for their families, they feel stressed, and at times, their aspirations turn to frustrations."

Assistant Professor Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University, who is Nominated MP, said: "One is that the PAP is the party for all Singaporeans. That the party is able to aggregate and align the interests of Singaporeans regardless of their station in life. Two, can the PAP continue to maintain the confidence of the electorate even as Singaporeans appreciate a more competitive political landscape? Managing expectations of a more demanding populace and delivering a good life are indicative of the challenges of taking on the problems of success. Three, the PAP has to be prepared to be big-hearted in dealing with dissent and contrary views. Can it lead and yet follow public opinion, instead of having to dominate the discourse?"

And winning back Aljunied GRC, which the PAP lost in the last general election, was the subject of discussion for Mr Victor Lye, who heads the Bedok Reservoir-Punggol branch of the PAP.

The branch chairman of a division in Aljunied GRC said a key lesson for the party is connecting with the people.

Mr Lye said: "I know the odds, to win is not easy. Still we must work hard to win people's hearts. But it will ultimately depend on the national perception of the party and the performance of the Aljunied MPs. The test is how much people feel connected to the party, are we there yet? Still have a lot to do."

"In Aljunied, we must ensure we do not harden hearts, like it has become in Hougang. We need candidates who have worked ground-up and who have a policy understanding. In Aljunied, we need to make clear we have candidates the party values. Otherwise it would be seen as a half-hearted attempt and we have to do it early so that we can rally the ground."

Responding, PAP's secretary-general Lee Hsien Loong said the party is regrouping in Aljunied GRC to give The Workers' Party's MPs a "tough fight".

MP for Aljunied GRC, Mr Muhd Faisal Abdul Manap, said his main priority is to serve "to the fullest" residents of Aljunied, who have given him their trust.

He said this in a statement to Channel NewsAsia, in response to Mr Lee's comments.