

# Focus may shift from local to national concerns

By JESSICA CHEAM

WHILE opposition parties may want the by-election to be a limited referendum on the People's Action Party's performance since the General Election in 2011, the ruling party looks set to try its utmost to keep the focus on local issues.

## On the ground

### ■ Michael Palmer

His abrupt exit as MP for Punggol East after confessing to an extramarital affair is unlikely to hurt the PAP in the by-election, say political observers and MPs.

This is because voters can draw a line between Mr Palmer's work as an MP, which many of them have said he did well, and his personal indiscretion.

Veteran PAP MP Charles Chong pointed to last year's by-election in Hougang and observed that former Workers' Party MP Yaw Shin Leong's fall from grace hardly dented support for the opposition party.

### ■ Rivervale Plaza

It is one of only two shopping hubs in the single-seat ward and some residents were unhappy about the delay in its upgrading. Work was due to be completed in May last year, but the contractor engaged by the Housing Board went bust.

Works have now resumed and North East District Mayor Teo Ser Luck has said they will be done by June.

Other matters on residents' wish list include more childcare facilities, wider roads and more bus services as more people move into the ward, more hawker centres and a cinema.

## National concerns

### ■ Transparency, accountability and the Aim saga

Opposition parties are set to take aim at a controversial sale of town council software to a PAP-owned company, Action Information Management (Aim).

However, on Tuesday night, less than 24 hours before the issue of the Writ of Election for Punggol East, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong moved to defuse public unhappiness over the issue.

He announced a government review of the Aim transaction and of town councils.

Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng said it was to be expected that opposition parties contesting the by-election would raise issues of transparency and accountability, in the light of the Aim saga.

"This is expected," he said.

"But I'm not sure whether residents of Punggol East will regard these issues as important to them when voting... Ultimately they want an MP to work for their interests."

### ■ GE 2011 issues that linger

These include immigration, foreign worker inflows and their impact on public transport, high property prices and costs of living.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan expects these hot topics to resurface as some remain unresolved, he said. "National issues tend to have greater traction (in elections), especially with the opposition parties, as it gives them an opportunity to raise questions."

The opposition is likely to cite these problems as evidence that voters need to elect more opposition members, to keep the Government in check and responsive to the needs and concerns of citizens, Mr Tan added.

Mr Baey agreed that to a certain extent, the by-election could become a barometer of public sentiment on these national issues.

"After GE 2011, people expected the Government to make changes. The outcome of the by-election could reflect whether voters are happy with the moves taken, and the speed in which they have been implemented."

However, opposition veteran Wong Wee Nam disagreed that the election will be a referendum on the PAP's performance.

"This election is important because it will test the maturity of the electorate. They will look closely and learn how to vote for their own interests, whichever party meets their values, ideology."

Punggol East's caretaker MP Teo Ser Luck, who is also a Minister of State and an MP for neighbouring Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC, said it was "still early days" to map out the key issues of the campaign.

In his view, "residents should choose someone who will serve them well and put them in first place. Someone who not only can be their representative but also be dedicated to the constituency."

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