



MEETING: The Opposition meeting on March 2, 2011, to carve out their battlegrounds in the General Election 2011. The part of the whiteboard circled in red linked SDA and WP to the contest in Punggol East SMC then.

ST FILE PICTURE

Opposition united front? It's 'asking for too much'

THE Workers' Party (WP) did not respond to an invitation from the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) to discuss the Opposition's strategy in the Punggol East by-election.

SDP said this when it posted the communication online.

The party said it invited WP on Tuesday, a day before the Writ of Election was announced, for a meeting to be held on Saturday.

A multi-cornered fight could split the opposition's votes, ultimately benefiting the ruling party, making it important for the opposition parties to put on a united front.

After the Writ was issued, it sent another e-mail asking for the meeting to be brought forward to today.

And when a reply from WP Chairman Sylvia Lim "gave no indication of WP accepting our invitation", SDP sent a third e-mail - this time to the party's secretary-general Low Thia Khiang.

SDP said that "as this matter is of intense public interest", it had put the exchanges on its website and it has received more than 20 comments.

While some called SDP "the bigger person, extending an olive branch to WP", others thought it prudent that SDP concentrate its time and resources on working the ground of its previous election campaigns.

In short, skip Punggol East, which WP contested at GE 2011 in a three-cornered fight and got 41 per cent of the votes.

PAP won the contest with 54.5 per cent of the votes while Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) got 4.5 per cent.

Political commentator Eugene Tan told The New Paper that having an opposition united front is probably asking for too much, "given the personalities involved and the rather different methods of politics that each opposition party deploys".

In many respects, the WP and SDP are almost diametrically opposite.

"WP tends to be less confrontational, playing shrewdly by the rules, while SDP is known for its more

confrontational approach," said Prof Tan, a Nominated MP and Singapore Management University law lecturer.

"Furthermore, trust is an important premium that is sorely lacking between the WP and the SDP," he said.

"The WP has tried to distance itself from the (other) opposition - in a sense, conveying that they are a part of the opposition, yet they rather be apart from them."

Prof Tan said it would come as no surprise if the others tend to call WP "arrogant".

"My sense is that the WP takes the view that it has full autonomy to decide whether they want to be part of the meeting. They are relatively confident of their prospects.

"But I don't see it as arrogance, but rather that they had contested there and came out credibly... and so all other parties should not contest in Punggol East," he said.

"This suggests that the WP is not prepared to back down from fielding a candidate in Punggol East. It sees it as their 'right' to contest in Punggol East."

Online spat

National Solidarity Party's former secretary-general Goh Meng Seng said the online spat would split the opposition even further.

To prevent that, he felt WP should come to the table.

The New Paper understands the other opposition politicians

have reached out to each other over the seat.

Said Mr Goh: "If SDP contests at the last minute and WP takes the position of no negotiation, the latter may anger some hardcore opposition supporters.

"On the public relations front, WP is not doing justice to their position (as an opposition party). Entering discussions is a symbolic gesture, regardless of whether the parties reach any agreement."

But Mr Goh felt SDP would be wise to step down from a multi-cornered fight in Punggol East, "unless they are very confident about their chances there".

SDP collected three sets of nomination papers from the Elections Department yesterday afternoon.

The SDA picked up four sets at about 5pm.

Two independents, private tutor Ooi Boon Ewe and businessman Zeng Guoyan, also picked up the papers.

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