

The rise of Pritam Singh as front runner for top WP post

Party members, observers describe a man more similar to Low than not

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Two years ago, some long-time Workers' Party (WP) cadres backed Mr Chen Show Mao's challenge against long-time party chief Low Thia Kheng for the role of WP secretary-general. They were unhappy at how Mr Low has been fielding younger and newer party members at general elections.

Since then, some in the party have avoided this group.

Not one man.

WP assistant secretary-general Pritam Singh quietly reached out to the group's leaders last year to better understand their issues and try to smooth things over, said a party member from the group who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"He knew they were unhappy and wanted to speak them," said the member in his 60s.

The effort to reach out helps to explain how the 41-year-old, within eight short years of joining the WP, became the favoured candidate to succeed Mr Low as chief of Singapore's biggest opposition party.

On paper, Mr Singh did not seem a natural successor to Mr Low, who has left his indelible imprint on the WP that he has helmed for 17 years.

Chinese-educated, Teochew-speaking with a gift for colloquial and hard-hitting speeches, and politically shrewd, Mr Low, 61, led the WP to unprecedented heights – including the wresting of a group representation constituency from the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in 2011. He has said he wants to step down this year.

Mr Singh, who obtained his law degree with Singapore Management University's Juris Doctor programme, is relatively inexperienced



Mr Pritam Singh at a Meet-the-People Session in Jalan Damai on Monday. Mr Singh and WP chief Low Thia Kheng are both known for their effectiveness in communicating, their down-to-earth manner – and the ability to be direct and blunt when it matters. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

in politics. Yet, interviews with party members, residents and political observers yield the broad strokes of a man who they say is more similar to Mr Low than not: Both are known for their effectiveness in communicating, their down-to-earth manner – and the ability to be direct and blunt when it matters.

Mr Singh declined to be interviewed for this article.

One well-known tale among party

members is that when confronted by unreasonable or long-winded residents during sales of the party's Hammer newsletter, Mr Singh is often the one still patiently listening after others have left. "He is friendly to work with and his residents like that," said Mr Gurmit Singh, a grassroots volunteer for Mr Singh.

Eunos resident Aziz Naim, 56, said: "He always says 'hi' first when he sees me. A leader should

be sincere and not snobbish."

His party colleagues said Mr Singh is well-liked for his consultative manner and for leading by example. Said former Non-Constituency MP Yee Jenn Jong: "He is very fair. It's more a discussion and he listens to what you have to say."

But in 2010, when a 33-year-old Mr Singh walked up the narrow stairs of the WP's former headquarters in Syed Alwi Road and asked to join the party, it was his bite that impressed party members.

Party cadre Frieda Chan, who knew Mr Singh from their undergraduate days in the 1990s, said he has always been passionate and vocal. In a bid to better understand and discuss religious issues, he had done a diploma in Islamic studies.

The former Jurong Junior College student's argumentative abilities honed in law school would come in handy in Parliament, winning him plaudits among party members.

Even former WP chairman John Gan, who supported Mr Chen in his bid to become party chief, agrees Mr Singh has done well: "Pritam is daring in Parliament and able to voice out on many issues, which is why many are behind him."

In his maiden speech in Parliament, for instance, he pushed for freedom of information legislation, drawing a rebuttal from Law Minister K. Shanmugam.

But Mr Singh also made some missteps when he first entered Parliament in 2011, full of football analogies and often crossing swords with PAP leaders. For instance, he came across as arrogant and overly combative, noted some. On one occasion, during a debate on the WP's town council troubles in 2015, he had refused to answer questions put to him by various MPs, saying his duty was only to Aljunied GRC residents – drawing flak from the public.

Mr Singh has since mellowed, choosing his words with greater care, said those interviewed. WP's deputy organising secretary Kenneth Foo Seck Guan puts this down to Mr Singh's sharper political acumen and presentation skills acquired over the years. "He seems to have learnt how to present a better tone. He is assertive, and not aggressive," he said.

Some say luck had a part to play in Mr Singh's success. He became an MP a year after he joined the party, when the WP team in Aljunied scored victory on the back of voters' unhappiness with the PAP.

Others say he made his own luck. While he is one of those embroiled in the WP's ongoing Aljunied-Hougang Town Council saga and is facing a lawsuit over it, he has since helped resolve the issues there.

In 2015, he took over as chairman of the town council from party chairman Sylvia Lim. Working with consultancy KPMG as town council chairman, he has fixed 15 of the 17 issues flagged in a special audit.

Said Mr Foo: "Everyone, including himself, knows it is no easy task, but he took it on and did it well."

After years of the WP being associated with Mr Low, some wonder if Mr Singh can connect as well to the party's traditional base of Chinese-educated voters and senior cadres. Political scientist Derek da Cunha feels it is not clear if Mr Singh's ethnicity would affect the party, since it has been led by non-Chinese before – Mr David Marshall and Mr J.B. Jayaretnam – and "so going for another non-Chinese as leader would not be new or novel for the WP".

Whether it will indeed be Mr Singh will be decided on April 8, at the party's leadership elections.

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