

Top lawyer boosts Singapore opposition

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5 May 2011
Agence France Presse

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Supporters say he could have easily become a cabinet minister, but Chen Shao Mao has caused a stir in Singapore by running against the government in Saturday's general election.

In a political culture obsessed with academic credentials, the 50-year-old lawyer and economist with degrees from Harvard, Stanford and Oxford universities has boosted the profile of the tiny, fragmented opposition.

Chen advised the Agricultural Bank of China on its \$22 billion initial public offering (IPO) last year -- the world's second biggest share launch -- and counts the Chinese finance ministry and international firms as clients.

A partner with prominent US-based law firm Davis, Polk and Wardwell, Chen fits the profile of a top candidate running under the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), which recruits high-flyers from the public and private sector.

Instead, he has returned home from China to become the prize catch of the opposition Workers' Party, which is fighting for greater pluralism in a parliament dominated by the PAP for more than 50 years.

"My thinking is very simple: we must have competition to progress," Chen said when he was first presented as a candidate last month.

"Parliament must have competition so that we will have better government policies and improve citizens' lives as well as build a better future for our children."

The PAP, which is credited with leading Singapore to prosperity and won all but two of the 84 seats contested in the 2006 elections, has admitted that the opposition may win more seats due to rising costs and other voter concerns.

The lanky, affable Chen was born in Taiwan and moved to Singapore in 1972 when he was 11, rose to the top of his class and was aiming to become a doctor till the National University of Singapore rejected his application for medical school.

Instead, he earned a bachelor's degree in economics from Harvard University, studied languages and history in Oxford University as a Rhodes scholar, and obtained a law doctorate from Stanford.

"I came back to Singapore to contest in the coming elections because I wish to give back to society and contribute to what we citizens have built," he said.

With his neatly combed salt-and-pepper hair and thick-rimmed eyeglasses, Chen cuts a distinctive figure on the campaign trail.

He is part of a five-member ticket widely seen as having the best chance of breaking the political stranglehold of the PAP.

In Singapore, most parliamentary seats are contested in clusters of four to six candidates, a setup seen as favourable to the well-entrenched PAP -- but also offering a windfall to the opposition if one of its tickets gets lucky.

"Typically the PAP has the creme de la creme and in this particular instance, one could say that this is one big fish that the PAP didn't quite reach out to," said political analyst Eugene Tan, an assistant professor of law at the Singapore Management University.

"When the opposition is able to put up such a candidate, certainly you get voters sitting up." Workers' Party secretary-general Low Thia Khiang, one of the few politicians who have successfully opposed the PAP, acknowledged the extraordinary attention generated by Chen for his team.

"I suppose his years of work in the international community, especially the capital market arena, has also caught the attention of Singapore," Low told a recent news conference.

The PAP has acknowledged Chen's credentials but tried to question his familiarity with Singapore after having lived overseas most of his adult life.

He rebuts this by saying he underwent military service even before becoming a full citizen in 1986, returns home four to five times a year, and plans to relocate his wife and children to Singapore whether he wins or loses.

Chen's team is gunning for office against a PAP ticket led by Foreign Minister George Yeo, a veteran cabinet member.

Tan, the political analyst, said Chen's extensive experience in the corporate world gives the Workers' Party "the credibility factor" in the election.

In the past, many opposition candidates were ridiculed for being relative non-achievers compared to the PAP's picks, but Chen has changed the perception overnight and 20,000 people cheered him like a rock star at a recent rally.

"I believe he is the secret weapon," a civil servant who only gave her surname Lim told AFP as she posed for a photograph with Chen when he canvassed for votes at a public market.