


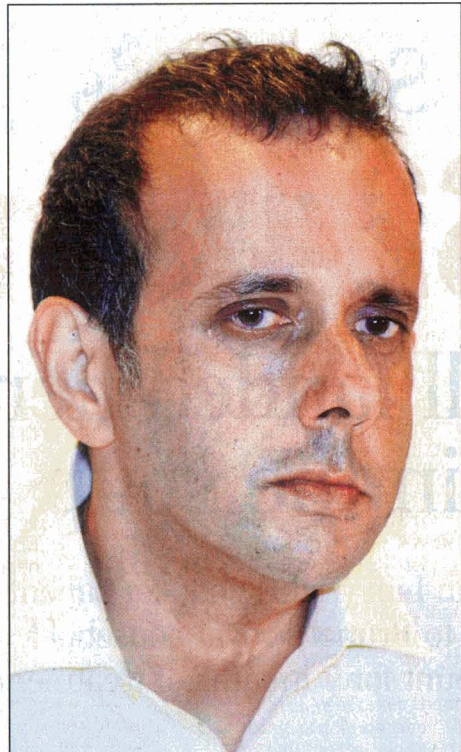
WHY WE QUIT

"We left because we had differences of opinion. That is common in any organisation. We tried to work things out initially but it reached a point where no further compromises could be made. We decided it was time to part company."

Mr Tony Tan, Ms Poa's husband and a potential poll candidate.




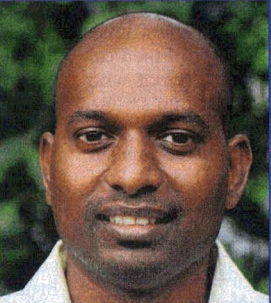

Ms Hazel Poa (right), 41, speaking on the group's behalf. She was a potential election candidate for the Reform Party.



WE WILL MOVE ON

"It is sad but we are focused on moving forward."

Reform Party secretary-general Kenneth Jeyaretnam (left), about the departures.

Others who quit include (from left) Mr James Teo, 51, Mr Jeislan Sivalingam, 41, and Mr Justin Ong, 25.

Nine members leave Reform Party

Five are from its top committee; they cite differences of opinion

■ BY KOR KIAN BENG

THE opposition Reform Party (RP) has been rocked by the mass resignation of at least nine members, including five in its top decision-making committee and a couple regarded as potential candidates for the upcoming general election.

The central executive committee (CEC) members who quit are: treasurer James Teo, 51; organising secretary Jeislan Sivalingam, 41; youth wing chief Justin Ong, 25; and CEC members Jeannette Aruldoss, 46, and Tony Tan Lay Thiam, 41, a former government scholarship holder slated to be a candidate for the election.

Others who left include Mr Tan's wife, Ms Hazel Poa, 41, also a potential candi-

date; freelance writer Samantha De Silva, 27; dentist Gan Theng Wei, 35; and advertising executive Nicole Seah, 24.

Sources said the CEC members and Ms Poa quit last Friday, followed by Ms De Silva and Dr Gan this week.

Some of those who left told The Straits Times that the key reason for their departure was that they found it difficult to work with Reform Party secretary-general Kenneth Jeyaretnam, 51.

Ms Poa, who spoke on behalf of the group, said: "We left because we had differences of opinion. That is common in any organisation.

"We tried to work things out initially but it reached a point where no further compromises could be made. We decided it was time to part company.

"We want to thank the Reform Party for the opportunities it gave us in the past two years, and we hope it does well in the coming election."

Asked about the group's plans, Ms Poa said those who quit were considering whether to join another party or to set up a new one.

"We still want to participate in the coming election. If we are unable to stand as candidates, we would probably help out as volunteers in other parties," she said.

It typically takes a few months to register a new political party. The Socialist Front was registered within five months, while the United Singaporean Democrats took two months.

The next general election is due by next February, but many believe it will be held by June this year.

Mr Jeyaretnam, when contacted yesterday, confirmed the departures but said these members did not resign.

Instead, they had not paid their membership dues for more than six months and so their memberships had lapsed in accordance with the party's Constitution, he said.

He shrugged off the impact the departures might have on the party's electoral chances, saying: "It's sad but we are focused on moving forward."

The party is keen to contest in West Coast GRC, Tanjong Pagar GRC, Hong

Kah GRC and Choa Chu Kang single-member constituency, if it has enough candidates.

The latest development is not the first time infighting has hit the RP, which was formed in July 2008 by the late opposition stalwart J.B. Jeyaretnam after he was discharged from bankruptcy and two months before he died.

After his death, his long-time ally Ng Teck Siong, 69, took charge of the party.

In March 2009, the younger Mr Jeyaretnam, a hedge fund manager who returned to Singapore in 2008 after many years in Britain, joined the party. A month later, following a tiff, Mr Ng was ousted and Mr Jeyaretnam took over.

The party's membership soared in the initial months of Mr Jeyaretnam's leadership. Most of the newcomers were young, educated professionals.

Before the recent spate of resignations, it had close to 100 members.

Among its many new recruits in 2009 were Mr Tan and his wife, Ms Poa, both Cambridge University graduates with first-class honours degrees. She studied

mathematics on a Public Service Commission scholarship, while he studied engineering on a Singapore Armed Forces Merit scholarship. Ms Poa worked for four years in the elite administrative service in the 1990s before resigning. Today, the couple run a tuition centre chain called SmartLab.

In May last year, the Reform Party became the first opposition party to unveil a slate of potential candidates for the next election, and in August released a draft election manifesto.

It also made news when it entered into alliance talks with Potong Pasir MP Chiam See Tong, though the move has stalled due to opposition within Mr Chiam's Singapore Democratic Alliance.

Political observer Eugene Tan, a law lecturer at the Singapore Management University, said the en masse resignations from RP were a significant development and could not have come at a worse time, with the general election imminent.

"It suggests that there are deep issues within the party," he added.

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