What's a big win for PAP?

It depends on many factors but many agree 65% share of votes and above is a big victory.

BY IGNATIUS LOW & LYNN LEE

WHEN you clap, you will know whether it is a loud or a weak clap.

That was Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong's oblique answer last week to what would constitute a strong mandate for the People's Action Party (PAP) this General Election. "It depends on not just the percentage, but where you lose seats," he explained. "If you lose one or two seats, let's say one seat in Hougang, but percentage is high, I will say that is a strong mandate for the team."

This being Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's last general election, the volume of applause for the PAP is being closely watched, not just by Singaporeans, but by analysts and governments abroad.

Back on track

SINCE the last election, the PAP government has successfully steered the Singapore economy back on to a firm growth trajectory, after weathering the worst recession since independence.

It has also been praised internationally for the way it dealt with the 2003 outbreak of Sars and its handling of the economy. Analysts and former Cabinet ministers agree that the headline number of the level of support for the PAP is associate with the public's mood.

For example, in the years when they did contest, they would have "optimally pulled up the PAP share of votes by as much as 1.5 percentage points."

But if we assume that they contested in all four elections and each polled 80 per cent of the votes (all four have consistently polled in the high 70s historically), they would have collectively pulled up the PAP's share of votes by as much as 6.6 percentage points.

This time around, only PM Lee is expecting a contest in Ang Mo Kio GRC. And like before, how he polls will be significant.

"Vote loss in strong constituencies, especially those which the PAP could still conceivably lose, would most certainly be a blow to the ruling party," says Mr Viswa Sadasivan, a political analyst with the Institute of Policy Studies.

Three factors

But they also caution against reading too much into the headline number, which could vary from election to election based on a number of factors.

The first is how comfortable voters are with the external environment. A "flight to safety" — in the wake of the Sept 11 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and a weak economy — has often been cited as the main reason why the PAP polled a very high 75.3 per cent in the 2001 General Election.

No one expects the PAP to repeat that feat now.

A second factor is whether the opposition chooses to contest constituencies led by "heavyweight" PAP ministers today. The theory is that personalities like PM Lee, SM Goh and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew will win by large margins, pulling the final tally up.

A Straits Times study of the last four general elections (from 1998 to 2001) shows that in most cases, these three leaders and former Cabinet minister Tony Tan were handwalkers, so the effect of their involvement is not so obvious.

For example, in the years when they didn't contest, they would have "optimally pulled up the PAP share of votes by as much as 1.5 percentage points."

"It was a disaster for everyone," recalls Dr Tan Cheng Bock, who has retired after being a PAP MP for 26 years. "I remember the mood was so low.

Voters have also been known to punish the opposition in good times, when they are more confident about their overall prospects.

So, what would constitute a strong win for the PAP this time around?

It comes down, of course, to votes and seats won, say analysts and politicians. The Straits Times spoke to yesterday. But there is also a need to look beyond the raw numbers.

In terms of votes, analysts agree that the headline number of percentage share of valid votes cast gives a broad indication of the level of support for the PM, his team and his policies.

They say that a very large, unexpected fall could mean that the PAP would need to reassess its election strategies.

But they also note that of-the-ballot loss of an SMC. The reason cannot be isolated to one MP, but is a 'landslide' in the broader context of the nation's mood.

A third factor to consider is the strength of the opposition. A weak opposition has been cited as one of the reasons for the PAP's 2001 routing. Dr Tan Cheng Bock says: "The weaker the opposition candidate, the harder you must try, because you can't just win, you must win big.

"If we lose a single seat, I think we will really have to analyse the local factors. Did we miss something, did we not cultivate residents? Temples, shop owners: Were we close to them?"

Ultimately, however, numbers can only tell you so much. "Percentages are important but more important is how the GE is fought and how issues are argued. Process, process, process. That is what it is all about," says Ms Conceicao.

SMU's Dr Tan, for example, lists a whole host of non-numerical criteria with which he is assessing the success of the PAP showing in this year's election.

They include whether the PM and his party were able to reach out across all segments of the population, whether the PAP was exemplary in its conduct of its electoral campaign and whether it was able to inspire future potential candidates to serve.