NO HARD FEELINGS

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MR CHIAM SEE TONG, the SDA chairman and Potong Pasir MP, on NSP's departure.

NSP quits: Chiam takes it in stride

BY KEN KWEK

MR CHIAM See Tong yesterday shrugged off the departure of the National Solidarity Party (NSP) from the opposition alliance that he heads.

"There is no quarrel between us," the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) chairman and Potong Pasir MP told The Straits Times, a day after NSP announced its move.

The SDA would "go on as usual", and would now focus on recruiting new members, he added.

Later, in a brief statement, Mr Chiam said there was "widespread sadness" among SDA members, but they respected the NSP's decision: "The SDA believes in the non-interference of the internal matters of each component party, including the desire of a party to leave the coalition."

He added that the SDA would "continue to work closely with the NSP".

The NSP, in quitting the alliance, cited problems in coordination of activities and "operational efficiency".

Without the NSP, the group is now left with Mr Chiam's Singapore People's Party (SPP), the Singapore Justice Party and the Singapore Malay National Organisation. NSP contributed 12 out of 20 candidates fielded by the SDA in the last election.

A senior SDA member and several political analysts interviewed yesterday said the weakening of the alliance would pose a challenge to Singapore's opposition movement.

SPP chairman Sin Kek Tong said he was "very worried" about the group's future, noting that the NSP's departure was a "wake-up call" for the SDA's remaining parties.

"We have not done enough community visits. We (the SPP) need to start doing this in several key areas and attract good candidates," he said.

"But we should be more strategic, focusing on three single seats – Potong Pasir, Chua Chu Kang and MacPherson – and one GRC, Pasir Ris-Punggol," he added.

Political observers said Mr Chiam's stature as an MP would not suffer from the split. But they had mixed views about its effect on his reputation as an opposition leader.

Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Jeanne Conceicao said: "Mr Chiam is a veteran politician who has weathered many a political storm. It is unlikely the public will hold this split against him and question his leadership, especially when the NSP has reportedly not done so."

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan had a different view. He said the split "suggests that Chiam's clout is slowly declining and throws into relief the need for him to groom a credible successor".

Both agreed the parting could give rise to three-cornered fights in future elections.

Mr Tan added that it reinforced the public's perception that "the opposition remains a fractured group and alliances are merely loose ones with no substantive ethos".