Leadership renewal in the opposition

Political self-renewal has long been a stated objective of the ruling People’s Action Party in Singapore.

It has declared the fourth generation of leaders has to emerge from this general election.

In the opposition camp, the push for leadership renewal is gaining momentum too.

Saifulbahri Ismail looks at the opposition’s efforts in rejuvenating its ranks.

Thousands had turned up for this Workers’ Party rally in Aljunied GRC during the 2006 general election.

Former civil servant Gerald Giam was among them.

A political officer with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Gerald had also served as a youth leader in South West Community Development Council.

He used to hold the view that the only way to improve the lives of Singaporeans was through the People’s Action Party.

But his time in the civil service convinced him that the country needed a stronger opposition to ensure better governance for future generations.

So in 2009, the 34-year-old who’s also the former deputy editor of The Online Citizen, a social blogging website, joined the opposition - the Workers’ Party.
After two years, Gerald is now a member of the party’s Executive Council, but it was no stroll in the park.

"There’s no short cut to leadership in our party, I’m on the ground selling Hammer on Sundays, knocking on doors, doing house visits and meeting with residents. It was a really daunting task at first for me. But it’s something I’ve really grown to enjoy. I’ve learnt how different groups of Singaporeans think. I’ve also been involved in revising the manifesto. That entailed a lot of discussions and it helps us to see this is what’s it like if in future we are in Government."

To get the votes it is gunning for, the Workers’ Party has set its sights on credible young leaders like Gerald for its political self-renewal.

At a recent political debate on Channel NewsAsia, Gerald was sent to represent the party - while Secretary-General Low Thia Khiang took a backseat.

Mr Low shares his strategic consideration.

"We take grooming of younger generation seriously, and we make sure that they are on the right path. And we want them to have a positive experience in political participation in the platform of the Workers’ Party."

In the WP, leadership renewal happens at three levels.

Mr Low says the party has a youth wing to reach out to younger Singaporeans; an area committee to expose members to grassroots work; and an internal procedure to induct cadre members.

However, opposition parties say the road to leadership renewal is fraught with challenges.

Secretary-General of the National Solidarity Party (NSP) Goh Meng Seng elaborates.

"We have a tougher job. We do not have the structure, the network like what PAP has - GLCs, Government services, the PAs and unions. We have our own network, business network, grassroots network, whenever we walk around, people will see us and get interested and the connection will be there. But we have to spend a lot of time to do follow-ups with these people."
Besides limited outreach, the pool of talented individuals with the passion to serve is also scarce.

Even Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has acknowledged the PAP cannot split itself to form a two-party system because it’s difficult to assemble two-first class teams to govern Singapore really well.

Associate Professor Hussin Mutalib, a political scientist from the National University of Singapore says the challenge is greater for the opposition.

"If the pool is so limited for the PAP, we can understand how limited more it is for the opposition. The PAP will get the crème de la creme, and the remainder will be up for grabs for all the opposition parties. That's a big challenge, because you don't have a pool where the opposition can say we want to choose the best, you can't, it doesn't exist because the best always goes to the PAP camp."

To get round this, some opposition parties have formed alliances.

Desmond Lim is the Secretary-General of the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA), which is made up of the Singapore Malay National Organisation (PKMS) and the Singapore Justice Party (SJP).

"The whole purpose of this alliance is to allow us to tap on the mass resources, have a mass movement. So, in order to achieve that, respective component parties should have combined resources. So, from there from the combined pool, it would be easier now for the SDA supreme council to identify the talents in the component parties and pull them out."

Faced with these challenges, political observers see leadership renewal proceeding at difference pace among the various opposition parties.

Eugene Tan, a law lecturer at the Singapore Management University (SMU) with this view.

"Parties that have been able to bring in new blood, have generally been able to be more sensitive to changes on the ground. One could talk for example of the Workers Party, I think within the Central Executive Committee of the Workers’ Party, you see many younger faces. The National Solidarity Party would be another. With the new Secretary-General, they seem to be making a concerted effort to make inroads in this particular election. But then you compare that with Singapore People’s Party led by Mr Chiam See Tong. While Mr Chiam is a very much respected veteran opposition MP, the state of affairs that have
affected SPP, in a way reflects in my view the lack of leadership renewal."

Despite the odds, opposition parties say good progress has been made in attracting new leaders to join their fold.

Take the Workers’ Party - almost all old guards in its Executive Council were replaced by newer members after the 2006 general election.

In the coming polls, corporate lawyer Chen Show-Mao - an alumni of three top universities - Harvard, Oxford and Stanford - has lined up on the side of the Workers’ Party.

At 50, Mr Chen is hardly young.

But for the party, he represents a breed of highly qualified candidates critical to its growth.

Mr Low, the WP chief and veteran opposition MP for Hougang believes this has been possible because the party has built up a credible reputation.

"This mother who’s my generation is prepared to introduce her daughter to me, a young daughter very promising, to be a member of the Workers’ Party. It says a lot! Because no one would have done that in the past, or even if the daughter or son want to join the opposition, the parents may be worried. They may dissuade them, look you might become bankrupt, you might get sued."

Other opposition parties, like the NSP have also been successful in attracting candidates with credible credentials.

Among them, young professionals, ex-civil servants and entrepreneurs.

NSP chief Goh Meng Seng explains why the party is able to bring in new blood.

"Compared to my generation, I think the awakening process for the young people has accelerated very much by the internet platform. People get more aware, more concerned, they read more about alternative views and of course that will result in more activism on the ground. These NGOs, and social political activists are big sources for our recruitment drive."

Political analyst Derek da Cunha offers another reason.

"Some Singaporeans might argue that over the past decade or so, they've not really seen
that strong alternative or dissenting voice being provided by PAP backbench MPs to Government policies. As such, a few of these individuals may have decided that they should step forward and offer themselves, providing that strong alternative voice as potential opposition candidates in the election."

The growth of political activism globally has not been discounted either.

The Middle East and North African region is still beset with political turbulence.

Closer to home, opposition parties in Malaysia made unprecedented gains in the 2008 election.

Associate Professor Hussin Mutalib explains.

"They see the upheavals, the revolutions, lots of political activism all over the world and it is possible, although the impact may not be as high, but you may have a small percentage of younger Singaporeans who looked at those things and say changes are possible. Maybe in the past, they think change is only a sense of idealism because we can't do much. But, now we see others in the world, ordinary people, they want change."

Ironically, the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) scheme introduced by the PAP government may have also helped the opposition renew its ranks.

The scheme allows defeated opposition candidates with the highest percentage of votes to enter parliament.

Prime Minister Lee has noted that having NCMPs in Parliament will raise the opposition’s profile - the way NCMP Sylvia Lim has done for the Workers’ Party with her parliamentary speeches.

And last year, Parliament approved legislative changes to raise the number of NCMPs from 6 to 9.

But SMU’s Eugene Tan believes that ultimately, it is performance in the polls which will set the stage for leadership renewal in the opposition.

"If the opposition does well, they are more likely to be able to attract new members. I think a lot would depend how the opposition parties do in this election, if they can build on the momentum of the forthcoming election generates, in four to five years time, we should see a generational change in the leading opposition parties. If you look at most of the
opposition party leaders, they are well into their 50s. In the end, it's important for any party who wants to do well to be able to show that they have a renewal process in place."

This is why Workers’ Party Chief Mr Low has set the party’s sights on a breakthrough in a Group Representative Constituency or GRC.

"If we are successful in breaking through a GRC, and I would expect more calibre people to come forward and thereby I think we would have even a better team. There are some potential here and there within the leadership team who can take over the party leadership in time to come. And one day I’m sure someone within the party will get the support of the team and the party to become the new Secretary-General."

Mr Low says when this happens, the party’s leadership renewal will be complete.

Until then, the party will continue casting its net wide in the hope of attracting more potential leaders to prepare for the next generation of opposition.