NSP: Revamped to shed old image

BY CHANG AI-LIEN

Operating system: The National Solidarity Party (NSP) was formed in 1987 by breakaway activists from various parties, including the People’s Action Party and Workers’ Party. Its founders include businessman Tan Chee Kien, 54; property consultant Ken Sun, 64; and eight others who have died or quit politics. Its hallmark is a moderate, measured stance, with a focus on bread-and-butter issues like cost of living and housing.

2G version: In its first three general elections (GE) in 1988, 1991 and 1997, it fielded eight candidates each time, garnering between 30 per cent and 38 per cent of the votes each time.

In 2001, it joined Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA), made up of Singapore People’s Party (SPP), Singapore Justice Party (SJG) and Singapore Malay National Organisation (PKMS), to pool resources to try to win the first group representation constituency (GRC).

That year, NSP’s secretary-general Steve Chia, then 31, emerged as the opposition’s best loser and became a Non-Constituency MP with 34.7 per cent against PAP incumbent Low Seow Chay in Chua Chu Kang. But he resigned as party secretary-general in 2003 after his wife reported him to the police when she found revealing pictures of him and the maid.

3G version: At the 2006 GE, SDA chairman Chiam See Tong was the only one of 20 candidates to win a seat. Mr Chia’s 39.6 per cent vote in Chua Chu Kang was overshadowed by 43.9 per cent by the Workers’ Party in Aljunied GRC, and he lost his NCMP seat. In 2007, a disillusioned NSP left the SDA alliance after six years.

Market response: The NSP believes in collective leadership and eschews “cult of personality” politics, say analysts. All decisions must be agreed on by its 19-strong central executive council. It has had a steady turnover in leaders — each as lacklustre and colourless as the next, some say. Its flexible structure and amorphous ideology also make it hard to decipher, and for voters to identify with.

Enhancements: Secretary-general Goh Meng Seng, a 41-year-old businessman, has revamped the party since being elected to the helm early last year. To shed its image of being a “male Chinese towkay” party, it started a Malay Bureau last year to focus on Malay issues and attract Malay candidates. It also worked at wooing more women as well as younger and better-educated members.

Spreadsheet: NSP is fielding its biggest slate of 24 candidates in four GRCs and four single wards. Its prize catch includes power married couple Tony Tan and Hazel Poa, both 41, who left the Reform Party this year. Both got first class honours at Cambridge University, Ms Poa reading mathematics on a Public Service Commission scholarship and Mr Tan in engineering on a Singapore Armed Forces merit scholarship.

Their pedigree could pick up votes in Chua Chu Kang GRC where they will run alongside NSP president Sebastian Teo, 63, process manager Jeisilan Sivalingam, 41, and business management consultant Nor Lella Mardidiah Mohamed, 37.

Another strong contender for the young vote is Ms Nicole Seah, 24, the youngest candidate unveiled so far who has already garnered over 27,000 Facebook “likes”. Just six days after starting her Facebook profile, she became Singapore’s second most popular politician online after Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

The advertising executive will be running in Marine Parade GRC with investment firm managing director Ivan Yeo Tiong Boon, 63, former Nee Soon Central MP Cheo Chai Chen, 60, project director Spencer Ng, 31, and warehouse supervisor Abdul Salim Harun, 29.

What users say: It is still too early to say how large a role Mr Tan and Ms Poa will have on the party’s fate in the election, says Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan. “Assuming that the pair stays on and plays a prominent role in the party, we can expect the NSP to revitalise itself,” he says.

And, Ms Seah, with her fresh-faced appeal, might well turn out to be the party’s new poster girl.