WP: From worker woes to ‘First World’ politics

BY RABHA BASU

The Workers’ Party (WP) was formed by Singapore’s first chief minister David Marshall in 1937. The flamboyant criminal lawyer had resigned as chief minister less than four months earlier to talk to the British to negotiate a deal for complete self-rule. It pledged to meet the needs of citizens, saying the party did not consider itself superior to its voters. It billed itself as an “honest nationalist party”, which would not “climb on the backs of workers to power and then kick them down”.

2G version: In the 1987 City Council elections, it won four of the five seats it contested. However, in 1990, the WP failed to win any seats – and Mr Marshall himself was defeated – in the General Election which brought the People’s Action Party (PAP) to power for the first time. He won the Anson by-election in 1994 but lost again in 1995, after which he resigned from the party.

3G version: The WP was rescued from the political wilderness by Mr J.B. Jeyaretnam, a London-trained lawyer like Mr Marshall, who took over as its secretary-general in 1971. A decade later, in his sixth attempt at the hustings, he became the first opposition candidate to break the stranglehold of the PAP, by winning the Anson by-election with nearly 52 per cent of the votes. He was re-elected in 1984, increasing his vote share to nearly 77 per cent. But two months later, he was charged with misreporting party accounts. A subsequent conviction and fine disqualified him from serving in Parliament and standing for elections for five years.

In his absence, the WP found a new star in Mr Francis Seow, a former solicitor-general and president of the Law Society, for the 1988 GE. A team led by Mr Seow came close to winning Aljunied GRC, with 49.1 per cent of valid votes. However, Mr Seow was subsequently accused of colluding with United States officials to interfere in Singapore’s internal affairs and detained under the Internal Security Act. He subsequently left the country. His fellow GRC candidate, Mr Lee Siew Choh, a former leader of the opposition Barisan Sosialis party, became the WP’s first Non-Constituency MP (NCMP), a post he held till 1991.

At the 1991 GE, Mr Low Thia Khiang, then the WP’s assistant-secretary-general, was elected as the MP for Hougang, a position he still holds. In 2006, WP chairman and law lecturer Sylvia Lim entered Parliament as an NCMP, by virtue of her GRC team being the best loser that year, with nearly 44 per cent of the votes.

Market response: Under Mr Low, the WP has emerged as the most likely choice for voters seeking pluralism in Singapore’s Parliamentary democracy, observes political commentator Eugene Tan. Its dedication to work-by-virtue of her GRC team being the best loser that year, with nearly 44 per cent of the votes.

Enhancements: The WP has transformed itself from a somewhat left of centre party to being a centrist party still very much focused on the concerns of the average worker. “So while its political persuasion has evolved and adapted to the changing realities of Singaporean society, the bedrock of its support remains the average worker,” says Assistant Professor Tan.

In the last decade, it has also successfully enlarged its support base by embracing white-collar issues. This GE, it wants to create a “First World Parliament” by raising the number of opposition MPs in Parliament. Indeed, its raison d’etre is to raise the role of the opposition in a one-party dominant system, says Prof Tan.

Spreadsheet: This GE, the WP is contesting in four GRCs and four single wards. It boasts the opposition’s biggest catch, corporate lawyer Chen Show Mao. Other candidates include IT consultant Gerald Giam, 35; entrepreneur Yee Jern Jong, 40; businesswoman Glenda Han, 35; and counsel Muhammad Faisal Abdul Manap, 34. Together with Mr Low and Ms Lim, the WP is fielding 23 candidates, its largest slate since 1988. This time, in possibly the biggest political gamble of his career, Mr Low is leaving his Hougang stronghold to helm his party’s bid for Aljunied GRC, which saw the toughest fight in 2006.

What users say: The WP, says political scientist Hussin Mushtah, stands the best chance among all parties of winning the biggest share of the opposition vote this GE. At best, it could win two SMCs and two GRCs, he says. At worst, it could improve its total 2008 vote share.