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Conservatives hold the key to outcome in East

THE New Territories East constituency looks likely to become a hotbed of political compromise and backdoor lobbying.

Although conservatives will not be fielding candidates in this battle, their behind-the-scenes support will be an important factor.

The constituency comprises the Sha Tin, Tai Po and North district boards.

Incumbent Legislative Councillor Mr Andrew Wong, of Sha Tin, and Tai Po district board member Mr Michael Lai Kam-cheung are expected to face a tough fight.

Two other would-be contenders, Mr Ko Kim-ching and Mr John Young, have yet to make up their minds about whether to join the contest.

Although incumbents have always had an advantage over their challengers, Mr Wong is expected to find his opponent in this election a challenge.

Mr Wong emerged victorious in 1985 elections after defeating four other contenders from the rural community — former Tai Po District Board chairman Mr Stephen Wong, a vice-chairman of Heung Yee Kuk, Mr Liu Ching-leung, former North District Board chairman Mr Pang Hang-yin and former Sha Tin Rural Committee chairman Mr Wai Hon-leung.

Mr Wong, who lectures in government and public administration at the Chinese University, is an appointed member on the Sha Tin District Board.

He was invited to join the Heung Yee Kuk in 1985 and has the support of the Kuk's influential chairman, Mr Lau Wong-fat, an elected Legco member who represents the Regional Council.

Mr Wong was recently "promoted" to Mr Lau's cabinet following a recent restructuring of the Kuk's leadership.

In a recent interview with *The Standard*, Mr Lau commended Mr Wong for the contribution he had made to Hong-kong and the welfare of rural residents in particular.

"His performance over the past three years has been good. I think he is a good candidate," Mr Lau said.

"I also believe he has the support of his colleagues and has a good chance."

But an analyst who has been monitoring electioneering in the constituency has warned Mr Wong against being over-confident.

The analyst, who preferred to remain anonymous, said Mr Wong could be ousted if the liberals, although in the minority, formed an alliance with rural voters not in Mr Lau's camp.

The analyst said there were indications the liberals intended wooing rural

votes for their candidate, social worker Mr Michael Lai.

Mr Lai, a member of the political group *Meeting Point*, is considered the liberal candidate with the best chance of defeating Mr Wong.

He was an appointed member on the Tai Po District Board when he successfully contested the district board elections in March.

There are 67 votes at stake in this constituency. The liberals have managed to get 10 committed votes only. Half the remaining 57 votes are said to be at the disposal of Mr Lau and the rest are said to be undecided.

It is understood the liberals have vigorously lobbied the "undecided" voters, and informed sources say they appear to have made progress.

Regional Council chairman Mr Cheung Yan-lung, who enjoys equal status with Mr Lau in the New Territories, has said publicly he will not stand for election in the constituency.

Mr Cheung, an appointed member of the North District Board, told *The Standard* he planned to seek election through Regco.

It is almost certain the liberals will not challenge Mr Cheung in the Regco contest.

In addition to Mr Wong and Mr Lai, Mr John Young and Mr Ko Kim-ching have expressed interest in standing for elections.

Mr Young is a member of the Hong-kong Affairs Society — a close ally of *Meeting Point* on several major issues.

But it appears Mr Young still has second thoughts about standing.

"I am still assessing my chances and have yet to make up my mind," Mr Young said.

Mr Ko Kim-ching, founder of the Chamber of North District Manufacturing Associations, is also having second thoughts.

"I may not have enough time," he said.

Analysts say that if Mr Young and Mr Ko join the fight they might split the liberal vote and cause a scramble for the undecided votes, weakening their chances of being elected.

"Obviously the two political groups (the Hongkong Affairs Society and *Meeting Point*) will have to sort out the matter to avoid a repetition of the two Kims," a district board member said. He was referring to the opposition leaders in South Korea, Mr Kim Dae Jung and Mr Kim Young Sam, refusing to compromise in the Korean presidential elections in December which saw them lose out to Mr Roh Tae Woo.