WASHINGTON • The night of June 12 at the Liberty Tap Room & Grill in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, Mr Mark Sanford, who had till then never lost an election, tasted defeat for the first time.

Mr Sanford has had a controversial life, but that has never stopped him from winning elections. This time, he made the mistake of making derogatory comments about President Donald Trump.

Just days before the election, his Republican challenger Katie Arrington told him bluntly during a talk radio conversation: "You can't have a seat at the table in the Oval Office, because you have offended the President numerous times."

The longtime Republican Congressman lost the primary for the party's nomination from that district for the November mid-term
congressional elections to Ms Arrington, who topped him by 2,660 out of nearly 85,000 votes cast.

That, say analysts, is the cult of Donald Trump. Offend him at your peril, because the President's only language is that of counter attack.

Three hours before the polls closed, he tweeted that Mr Sanford was "nothing but trouble".

"Mark misjudged it, attacking Trump. That's what killed him," former South Carolina Congressman Chip Limehouse told the journal Politico.

"It's becoming a cultish thing, isn't it?" Republican Senator Bob Corker - who is due to retire - told reporters after Mr Sanford's defeat.

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Trumpism, like all populist movements, won't die quickly
"It's not a good place for any party to end up with a cult-like situation as it relates to a president that happens to be of - purportedly - the same party," he added.

Late last month at the Mackinac Policy Conference in Michigan, former Speaker John Boehner remarked, only half in jest: "There is no Republican Party. There's a Trump party. The Republican Party is kind of taking a nap somewhere."

On the face of it, Mr Trump has delivered on several of his America First promises—from withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Paris Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal, to moving the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

Still, he has been unable to get Mexico to pay for his border wall, and his promise of the return of millions of manufacturing jobs has yet to be realised. Critics say he is better at breaking things than making them; even allies abroad worry about a trade war, and the undermining of the rules-based international order.

But the US economy is doing well.

On the foreign front, Mr Trump lists "solving" the North Korea problem among his achievements.
All this is crowd pleasing to a base that is "absurdly loyal", in the words of speech writer Dan Conley in a June 20 article in Political Wire.

To his base, the appeal of Mr Trump is much more about the cult of personality than someone delivering on issues, Dr Glenn Altschuler, professor of American Studies at Cornell University, told The Straits Times.

The first is far more important than the second, he said.

"That cult of personality includes someone who is perceived as a strong man, someone who says what should be said and what others have been afraid to say, who is not politically correct; those are key elements of his appeal."

Before the issue of children being separated from parents at the Mexican border blew up last week, Gallup reported that nationally, Mr Trump's job approval rating had averaged 45 per cent in the week of June 10 to 16. This tied his own personal high, in the first week after his inauguration in January last year, but was below the historical average of 53 per cent for all presidents in Gallup polling since 1945.

But the low rating conceals an imbalance, in which his ratings in his base have been consistently high, while they have been low among Democrat supporters - reflecting the toxic polarisation characteristic of the US political landscape.

According to a Quinnipiac University poll for example, 66 per cent of American voters polled opposed the policy of separating children and parents when families illegally cross the border into the United States. But 55 per cent of Republican voters supported the separation policy.

Dr Altschuler said that besides the cult of personality, one other "vital fact" is that the Republicans despise the Democrats "more than they ever have in over a hundred years".

"These two facts combine so that the Republican base is very solid."
He added that the cult of personality also feeds on the contempt many Americans have for politicians.

"They love it when Trump puts his finger in the eyes of politicians and don't mind at all if he violates norms of behaviour in insulting them," Dr Altschuler said.

Dr Rafael Frankel, a vice-president at the international consultancy BowerGroupAsia, agrees that Mr Trump's support is strong among Republican voters.

"I think he's got his base locked in," he told The Straits Times.

"Republicans who challenge him get nowhere; in fact, like Mark Sanford, they get punished. He owns the Republican Party now," he added.

But this does not mean Mr Trump is immune, said analysts.

For ordinary Americans, the deepening trade war - principally with China but also with other major trading partners - may offset the gains of tax cuts and a growing economy. In fact, it could spawn job losses.

Also, Mr Trump's support base is a minority; it could be swamped if Democrat voters turn out in larger numbers or if independents swing towards the Democrats.

"It is a minority that is so loyal," Dr Charles Bullock, political science professor at the University of Georgia, told The Straits Times.

"Trump's successes have been primarily on foreign policy, but a lot of Americans don't go to the ballots on foreign policy," he added.

Dr Michael Gerhardt, professor at the University of North Carolina's School of Law in Chapel Hill, said: "He has certainly tried to give his base what he promised them."
"But most of what he's given them are negative in character, pulling out of things and not necessarily positive - unless one agrees with the Jerusalem move," he told The Straits Times.

"He's managed to bully the party faithful to follow him, though it's not entirely clear how any of the things he's done has actually helped the country. He's helped himself more than anything else," Dr Gerhardt said.