

Bill to allow special arrangements for General Election during COVID-19 outbreak introduced in Parliament

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Voters who are under COVID-19 stay orders will be able to vote outside of their electoral divisions in the upcoming General Election, in special provisions introduced for the next election, said the Elections Department (ELD) on Tuesday (Apr 7).

The Parliamentary Elections (COVID-19 Special Arrangements) Bill was introduced in Parliament on Tuesday by Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing.

"This Bill forms part of ELD's contingency planning for the next GE, which has to be held by 14 April 2021," ELD added. "The provisions in the Bill are temporary arrangements, and will only apply to the next GE, and not to any election held after the stipulated date."

Electors who are subject to COVID-19 stay orders will be allowed to vote outside of their electoral divisions, such as at designated facilities they are housed in under the proposed provisions.

This ensures that voters on stay orders will not mingle with other voters while voting, said ELD.

An aspiring candidate may also authorise a representative to file his nomination paper on his behalf, if he is on a COVID-19 quarantine order or stay order, hospitalised or ill.

Currently, the Parliamentary Elections Act requires aspiring candidates to file nomination papers in person.

The Bill is expected to be debated at its second reading during the next Parliament sitting.

It allows ELD to implement temporary arrangements to ensure the safety of voters, candidates and election officials, should the next General Election take place amid the COVID-19 situation, said Mr Chan in response to media queries on the Bill.

"This Bill forms part of ELD's contingency planning for the next GE. It is not related to the timing of the General Election. The Prime Minister will decide when to call the election, taking into account the challenges confronting our country, including the evolving COVID-19 situation," he said.

"The Government is fully focussed on tackling COVID-19. Our immediate priorities include helping affected Singaporeans and companies, and implementing the circuit breaker measures to slow down the outbreak."

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has said that the timing of the next General Election depends "on the situation, and the outlook" of the pandemic.

"We have two choices. Either hope and pray that things will stabilise before the end of the term so that we can hold elections under more normal circumstances – but we have no certainty of that," he wrote on Mar 14.

“Or else call elections early, knowing that we are going into a hurricane, to elect a new government with a fresh mandate and a full term ahead of it, which can work with Singaporeans on the critical tasks at hand.”

His comments came a day after changes to the electoral boundaries were announced by the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee on Mar 13.

He later said on Mar 27 that no decision has yet been made as to when a General Election will be called.

“I would not rule any possibility out,” he had said.

Political analyst Felix Tan said that when the election will be called depends on whether current “circuit breaker” measures will mitigate the rise of COVID-19 infections.

A significant drop in infections might mean an election shortly after this break, he said. The election can be postponed if the number of coronavirus cases remain high.

Tuesday marked the first day non-essential work places and schools in Singapore were closed in stricter measures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. The “circuit breaker” period is to last until May 4.

“Nevertheless, this tabling of an election Bill clearly demonstrates that the government is determined to hold an election as soon as possible regardless,” he said.

While the introduction of the Bill does not mean that GE is imminent, it is “yet another gesture” that it is around the corner, said the deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies Dr Gillian Koh.

“This puts more pressure on the opposition to conclude their discussions about strategy and even ambitious plans for coalition-building – it cannot be a surprise when the Writ is issued from hereon,” she said.

She added that there is provision in the Bill for other tweaks to the polling system. These could include staggered voting times or setting up several paths in polling stations to reduce mass gatherings, and ensuring that social distancing is possible.

Some digital services have been rolled out ahead earlier, such as the electronic registration at polling stations. Candidates will also have access to a number of services online - such as appointing election agents, paying election deposits and submitting their names for the ballot paper.

“So the normal preparatory moves of the ELD already make it possible to minimise the number of people who need to serve and interact with voters and election agents of the contesting parties,” said Dr Koh.