

GE during Covid-19 pandemic? Not ideal but experts suggest safeguards for public safety, fairness

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SINGAPORE — With the Covid-19 situation set to last for quite some time, the next General Election (GE), which is due by April 14 next year, could be held in the midst of the pandemic.

On March 27, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that he “would not rule any possibility out” regarding the timing of the polls, and stressed that it would be a “very difficult decision”.

“I think once all the requirements are cleared, and that includes the electoral boundaries which have been reported, the electoral rolls have to be certified and republished,” he said. “Once that is done, that means all possibilities are there. I will have to judge the situation.”

On Tuesday, the Elections Department (ELD) will table the Parliamentary Elections (Covid-19 Special Arrangements) Bill which, if passed, will allow the ELD to implement temporary arrangements to ensure the safety of voters, candidates and election officials during parliamentary elections.

Several opposition parties have criticised the prospect of the polls being conducted during this health crisis.

International and Singapore-based political experts whom TODAY spoke to noted that it is not ideal to conduct elections during a pandemic. While some pointed out that delaying the polls could be problematic, others felt there was cause to consider postponing the GE.

Still, should the GE be called soon, the experts suggested several ideas on how it could be held in Singapore. Some of the suggestions were drawn from countries that are holding, or have held, polls this year.

They stressed that there are legislative and constitutional differences among these countries, which were also in a different phase of the infection, that can make comparisons with Singapore's polls difficult. For example, South Korea, which will go to the polls on April 15, has managed to flatline its epidemic curve.

Speaking to TODAY in the heat of the April 7 US presidential primaries for Wisconsin state, Professor Barry Burden, director of the elections research centre at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said that regardless of the best efforts of election officials, it would be challenging to conduct an election during a pandemic.

Citing his observations of the US primaries so far, he said: “There are sure to be voters who decide not to participate out of a concern for their safety, and there might be problems on election day because poll workers are not available. Yet it's not clear that delaying the (Wisconsin) election until later in the spring would be preferable, as the virus is likely to infect more of the state's residents over the next several weeks.”

The experts said that in general, there are several principles which officials have to uphold in a free and fair election: It should be fraud-proof, efficiently conducted, and should not compromise voter turnout, voter engagement, and the safety of all involved.

With these in mind, they suggested ways in which elections can be conducted in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic and the possible limitations:

POLLING

- **Postal balloting and absentee voting**

Under such a system, ballot papers are mailed out and then returned via post, hence replacing the need for a voter to queue at polling stations to cast their vote. It is a form of absentee balloting, whereby voters do not go to the polling stations that they are assigned but can vote through other means.

Amid a pandemic, this could allow those who are in isolation or serving quarantine orders and stay-home notices to vote. Special considerations could be made for hospitalised patients to vote as well.

But absentee balloting is typically conducted in countries where voter turnout has been low, partly because the costs of voting — the inconvenience of heading to the polling station — often outweigh the benefits of exercising one's right to vote. This is a problem often referred to as the paradox of voting.

Unlike these countries, Singapore has not needed to scale up absentee voting (except for overseas voters) due to consistently high voter turnout. In the previous GE in 2015, the voter turnout was 93.56 per cent.

Prof Burden said in the US, it was not possible to sufficiently ramp up absentee voting in a matter of weeks amid the pandemic.

“It is difficult for states to print enough customised ballots and envelopes in time for a spring or summer election. Officials also need to develop protocols for processing a large volume of mail ballots and get funding from their state governments to make the transition possible,” he said.

“Mail ballots are a wonderful convenience, but mail voters also face difficulties becoming registered, getting identification, and returning absentee ballots on time with no mistakes. The whole system is much more complicated than it first appears.”

It is a “tragedy” anytime an eligible voter cannot vote because they missed a deadline or failed to meet some other requirement, such as signing the absentee ballot envelope, Prof Burden noted.

Because of these problems, Associate Professor Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University (SMU) believes that this method of voting is unlikely for Singapore if the polls were to be held soon.

“Voter secrecy, election integrity and robustness of the mode of balloting can be problematic (with this method). I suspect time is not on the side of the ELD to test, certify and educate all stakeholders on the alternative modes of balloting.”

- **Enhanced hygiene measures at polling stations**

It is more likely for Singapore’s election officials to boost hygiene measures specifically to tackle Covid-19 at the polling booths.

For its coming polls, South Korea’s National Election Commission permitted absentee balloting amid a rise in new infections, but it appears that a large portion of the vote is still expected to be cast via in-person balloting.

As such, it has been putting in place enhanced precautionary measures at its polling stations. Facility considerations such as more spacious and well-ventilated voting areas, ample public health signages and makeshift polling booths for symptomatic voters have been announced.

Voters would be required to don masks, stand at least 1m apart while waiting in line, sanitise their hands and wear plastic gloves provided by officials. Temperature checks and extra polling stations would also be provided.

In Singapore, additional priority queues for seniors have also been mentioned by the Government. Managing the queues would be key for voter turnout too — if the queues are too long, voters may be discouraged to vote.

However, the risks of viral spread will not be completely eliminated, said the experts.

“Furniture, stationery, voting booths, voting machines that require touch, ballot papers and ballot boxes could all become ways people get infected while voting,” said Associate Professor Chong Ja Ian from the National University of Singapore.

- **Drive-through voting, staggered times**

One idea is to offer alternative voting procedures or timings at polling stations, such as drive-through voting as what some US states have done. This limits the number of people voters are in close contact with at the polls.

To make this work would require a logistical feat, said Assoc Prof Chong. Election officials must be properly briefed and trained, while voters must be informed early and repeatedly about what to do, he said.

Care should also be taken to preserve the integrity of the vote — a complicated voting process could confuse workers, leading to untallied or misplaced votes, or worse, lost ballot papers.

- **Emergency powers due to health crisis**

The experts noted that there is contingency legislation within the Parliamentary Elections Act for election officials and the President to respond to emergencies, such as a health hazard.

If there is a health hazard, the President may postpone Nomination Day, and the Returning Officer may temporarily suspend polling, postpone or end voting early at certain polling stations on Polling Day.

There are limits to postponing polling — it must be postponed to a date within three months after the dissolution of Parliament.

These powers have never been invoked in Singapore's history.

- **Online voting**

Over the past week, several commentators had also raised the possibility of voting online. Legal provisions had been drawn up for such a possibility almost 20 years ago, but this has never been implemented, said Assoc Prof Tan.

"The question is whether we have a ready e-voting system in place," he said.

Such a voting procedure is also not foolproof and is susceptible to cyberattack, just like any other electronic system, added Assoc Prof Chong.

Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) said it is also difficult to ensure the integrity of the online vote, even if the procedure requires a SingPass log-in or any additional methods of electronic verification. "How do we know who is the one voting?" he said.

In New Zealand, which is slated to hold its GE on Sept 19 and has imposed a nationwide lockdown due to Covid-19, the possibility of online voting is also a hotly debated issue, with most people unconvinced of its safety and security.

Speaking to TODAY, Victoria University of Wellington's professor of political science Stephen Levine said if online voting could be as robustly certified and "unhackable" as online banking, it could well be an alternative way for an election to be conducted since in-person balloting may become impractical.

But he said New Zealand is not likely to be opposed to delaying its polls, with time devoted to work out the kinks of an online voting system. The country had delayed its general election during the two World Wars.

"Perhaps in the future, 'virtual voting' will be safe, widespread and well supervised. We are not at that situation yet, however," said Prof Levine.

- **Extending polling beyond 1 day**

One suggestion which could help reduce the burden on polling stations could be to cater for early votes, such as by extending polling beyond a single day, said Prof Levine. If this could be done, New Zealand may not need to postpone the vote at all.

Can it be done in Singapore?

Some analysts noted that this could be unfair, especially if the early votes are also counted early or if word got out about how people have been voting.

CAMPAIGNING

- **A muted Nomination Day**

On Nomination Day, prospective candidates submit their nomination papers and certificates to the Returning Officer in person at various nomination centres within the contested constituency, accompanied by their proposers, seconders and at least four assentors.

They are also typically accompanied by large crowds of the respective political parties' supporters, who are present to cheer on the candidates. After the candidates submit their papers, they will then give their speeches.

Safe distancing measures could mean that all the fervour will be stripped away, with hard limits imposed on crowd sizes.

But some experts said speeches should still be allowed in some form — Nomination Day is the first day for candidates to be formally introduced, said Assoc Prof Chong. "How this can be done with a muted Nomination Day must be spelt out, as would regulations for campaign advertising," he added.

- **Virtual rallies**

Massive rallies are where electoral promises are typically handed out, and also give the electorates an insight into the parties' positions and a measure of the candidates themselves. These highly packed events will be impractical amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

In their place, political parties are likely to be already exploring live-streaming options so that they may hold virtual rallies online, said SMU's Assoc Prof Tan. "Monologues, lengthy ones at that, are not going to work. Voters may toggle between different parties' e-rallies if interest cannot be sustained," said Assoc Prof Tan.

However, these live-streams would significantly alter the social aspect of rallies, Assoc Prof Chong said, adding that better resourced political parties will also be in a stronger position to harness their rallies as social media events.

- **Home-based campaigning**

With the circuit-breaker measures in place, there may well be a captive audience at home which political parties can reach out to online. "The virtual will become the mainstay approach in campaigning," said Assoc Prof Tan.

With a social media platform, parties could hold dialogues, targeted online engagements, and introduce candidates through "ask me anything" forums that have become a popular format in online marketing.

However, it remains to be seen how effective social media can be as a platform to court voters.

The Institute of Policy Studies' post-2015 GE study concluded that the Internet and social media did not play a decisive role in the polls. Mainstream media played a bigger role: 98.5

per cent of social media users relied on traditional media sources such as television, print newspapers and news websites.

LKYSPP's Assoc Prof Tan noted that these virtual measures may also alienate older voters.

- **Televised appearances and advertising**

More television appearances could also be a possibility, as Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean noted in Parliament last month.

Currently, air-time on free-to-air radio and television are allocated for party political broadcasts, including on Cooling-Off Day. Since the 1980 General Election, political parties that are fielding at least six candidates under a recognised party symbol will be eligible for air-time on the broadcasts.

Expanding these air-times could be a good idea, as currently only key representatives from the party would give the address, wrote Workers' Party member Yee Jenn Jong on his Facebook page. Mr Yee, who is a former Non-Constituency Member of Parliament, suggested that air-time be given to all candidates so that residents can find out more about the candidates standing in their constituency.

Currently, political advertising is governed by the Parliamentary Elections Act, which regulates the use of posters and banners, as well as online advertising platforms during the GE.

Assoc Prof Chong added that any changes to advertising rules need to be done in an even-handed manner, such as by setting out the rules on spending and time caps for televised ads. "Would there be soft messaging by better resourced political parties that make the electoral playing field less level than it ought to be?" he said.

- **Targeted phone campaigning**

To reach out to seniors, parties may consider phone campaigning to target households of elderly voters.

Such a move allows for social distancing, said Assoc Prof Chong. But phone campaigning also requires resources and connections, which could also favour well-heeled parties, he added.

Its effectiveness is also questionable. "People are reluctant to listen to long messages on the phone," said LKYSPP's Assoc Prof Tan.

- **Campaigning on perambulating vehicles with loudspeakers**

Existing rules also allow for a vehicle fitted with loudspeakers to be used to advertise during an election, and a police permit under the Public Order Act is required. Parties will have to follow the requirements of the permit, such as only campaigning during stipulated timings.

Such a public address system could be costly, but serve as a means for parties to bring candidates to neighbourhoods, said the experts.

"But I do question its effectiveness. It may create some awareness that a party is contesting in an area but not much beyond that," said Assoc Prof Tan.