

Social media open up Singapore political debate

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When the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) introduced a fresh-faced 27-year-old woman as one of its candidates for next month's elections, it was hoping to generate buzz among young voters.

It got more than it bargained for when management consultant Tin Pei Ling and the PAP came under attack on the Internet over everything from her accent to a Facebook photo of her posing with a designer handbag.

Tightly governed Singapore is facing one its most intense election campaigns ahead of the May 7 vote, thanks to the lifting of a ban on online political campaigning and the heavy penetration of social media among the population.

With election advertising long banned in the print and broadcast media, the opposition -- which held just two of the 84 seats in the outgoing parliament -- is using the Internet to get its message across to the 2.35 million voters.

The PAP, which has governed since 1959, is in turn using the Internet and social media to retain its grip on power, with more than 200 videos on its website and ministers posing with babies for Facebook profile pictures.

Even though the campaign doesn't officially start until next week, all political parties have been using Facebook, Twitter, blogs and their own websites for months to promote their platforms and candidates.

"Politicians and parties in general are active on social media, particularly in Facebook and Twitter, which are relatively popular in Singapore," said Kelly Choo, co-founder of online business intelligence firm Brandtology.

"Citizens are consuming political information whether directly or through their social networks, so it makes sense for them (politicians) to engage the voters through these channels."

Facebook is estimated to have three million members in Singapore, which has a population of just over five million.

Twitter is popular among the youth, with one estimate placing the local users of the micro-blogging site at more than 900,000.

In addition, government critics have set up alternative websites to counter the pro-PAP mainstream media, attracting like-minded "netizens" whose strident views are largely filtered out of local newspapers and television.

One of the most active politicians on Facebook is Foreign Minister George Yeo, the PAP incumbent in what is expected to be the most hotly contested ward in the elections.

Yeo -- whose public Facebook page was "liked" by more than 18,500 people as of April 21 -- had to create the alternative page because his private account had long reached the 5,000-friend limit, according to one of his posts.

Other senior members of the cabinet own Facebook pages as well, but Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong does not have one.

The opposition Singapore Democratic Party's secretary-general Chee Soon Juan said social media would enable it to bypass pro-PAP newspapers and broadcasters.

"For the SDP it will be crucial for us given the state of the media in Singapore where everything is controlled by the ruling party," he told AFP, while admitting that social media's impact would be limited in the short term.

"This is the first time that a lot of these tools are going to be employed, so it's very new in that sense, so it may take a little while for it to become very much a part of the political scene, electoral scene," he said.

Workers' Party webmaster Koh Choong Yong -- who oversees the party's Facebook and Twitter accounts as well as website -- concurred.

"It is efficient because of its speed and ease of delivery, but it cannot compare with the coverage of traditional media," Koh told AFP.

"New media caters only to a particular segment of the population... It helps us to reach out to more people than we could have, but it is probably not going to be the major determining factor in the winning of votes."

Arun Mahizhnan, deputy director of the Institute of Policy Studies, a government think-tank, said social media in Singapore were still "underdeveloped compared with more politically-active environments".

"Part of the reason is the lack of practice in political discourse. Part of the reason is the chilling effect that Internet regulations have had on Singaporeans," Arun told AFP.

Although Singapore has eased Internet regulations for the campaign, tough penalties are still in place for defamation and fostering racial and religious hatred.
