

SPECIAL REPORT: SINGAPORE ELECTION

How big can the PAP win in Singapore poll?

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Opposition parties tipped to win more seats, more of popular vote

A majority of Singapore's eligible voters are expected to give a continued vote of support to the People's Action Party (PAP) at Friday's general election, but to what extent the ruling party can improve from its worst showing at the previous poll remains to be seen.

Friday's contest is about an attempt to trigger attitude and process change in formulating and implementing policies versus the need to ensure continued political stability under one-party rule, political analysts say.

Pundits and bloggers expect opposition parties to win more seats and more of the popular vote at the 2015 election, leading to significant checks and balances on the PAP, which managed to take 81 of the 87 constituency elected seats and garnered 60.14% of the total votes cast at the 2011 general election, the lowest share since the country's independence.

This 17th general election is an important milestone for the political landscape of Singapore, the city-state with the fourth-largest economy and the highest per-capita income in the Southeast Asian region, as Singaporeans have become more politically vocal, expressive and assertive about their rights.

One in five of the 2.46 million eligible voters are below the age of 30. They want change, more freedom and less government control over their lives.

The PAP, under the leadership of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, has been addressing social and economic issues that caused its popularity to decline at the previous poll.

The ruling party has also capitalised on celebrations for the country's 50th independence anniversary and the legacy of the late Lee Kuan Yew, the country's first prime minister who transformed the island-state from third world to first world in one generation and who was the father of the current premier.

'Rewarding good policies and good leadership to bring the country forward' is the key message of the party.

If the crowds of people attending political rallies each night during the past nine days of campaigning are anything to go by, Singaporeans appear to enjoy political gatherings as much as their regional neighbours.

Honking, whistling, effigies, pop-up electrical posters on housing estates as well as TV debates and traditional candidate walkabouts and live streams of rallies offered by both the well-established press as well as online media made this general election a lively one.

"I need them to gradually feel what it's like to attend political rallies," Lilian, 34, told the *Bangkok Post* on Wednesday as she squeezed her three young children from Aljunied constituency into front rows near the stage outside UOB Plaza in the city's business district amid stifling hot temperatures to see and hear the incumbent prime minister speak.

"It's their future and I want them to know that the PAP will be the party leading them into the SG100," said Ms Lilian, who asked that her last name be withheld, referring to Singapore's centennial.

Echoing the way PAP has portrayed the situation to voters, and acknowledging the significance of this election in setting the right direction for the country, Lilian is like many others who fear, perhaps as a result of government spin, that the surge in popularity of the opposition parties will disrupt Singapore's prosperous future.

She is from the constituency that was dominated by the leading opposition party Workers' Party (WP) after the last election in 2011. The WP has been put under the spotlight by the ruling party as an example of the failure of an opposition party in managing a town council.

The repeated focus on this town council saga, while busying the WP in rebutting the allegations right up until the end of the campaign, has irritated many moderate Singaporeans.

WP chairwoman Sylvia Lim said the ruling party may succeed in other indices, but not in the happiness index as they have made Singaporeans unhappy.

"Vote to empower your future, vote for democracy, vote for justice and vote to break away from total control of your life by the PAP," is the punchline by the WP whose seven MPs are defending their turf Friday.

But this election is not just about these two parties as the Social Democratic Party (SDP) is also running along with activists.

Roy Ngerng Yi Ling, a blogger known for his expose of the Central Provident Fund controversy and a Reform Party candidate, said the power of the poor has been underestimated but this election might reveal there are more voices "despising the system that is in favour of the elites".

"The silent majority is portrayed to be middle class and pro-PAP but in fact they are emerging to speak out more against the entrenchment of the PAP's one-party dominance," Mr Ngerng said.

A scholar summed up the characters of the competing parties with a musical analogy.

"WP is like a rock star. SDP is seductive but PAP resembles jazz that can make you drowsy sometimes," said Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies.