

## **2 very different groups to vote for first time**

### **Young voters and new citizens have different takes on first-world S'pore**

**Lee U-wen**

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They are gearing up to cast their vote at next month's general election for the very first time. But they see the world very differently.

There are the young Singaporeans - those who have experienced living only in a first-world country. Many are more demanding of life, more ambitious and, perhaps crucially, not able to relate to the hardships that their elders went through during Singapore's formative years, political observers say.

Of the 2.35 million eligible voters this time round, about one in four - or about 600,000 - are estimated to be between the ages of 21 (the minimum legal voting age) and 35.

Then there are the large numbers of new citizens - people who have sunk their roots here in large numbers over the years - who, perhaps inevitably, compare their current quality of life in Singapore with the various countries they have left behind.

In 2009, the government granted pink identity cards to 19,900 immigrants, down slightly from 20,500 the previous year. Parliament was told last July that Singapore will have to take in 20,000 new citizens every year to replace the country's declining population.

Political observers say that the first-time voters, given their size in numbers and their present state of mind, will play a crucial role in determining the fates of the various constituencies that they live in.

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) will have its work cut out trying to bring alive its 'third world to first world' story to the younger electorate, said Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University's Faculty of Law.

'They have grown up in a first world, the only Singapore they know is a first world. The PAP story, hence, has less traction, which means that the opposition parties can say they have a fairer chance of engaging them and getting their messages across,' said Assistant Professor Tan.

It could be a different issue with new citizens, many of whom have moved from third-world countries to first-world Singapore.

'Most new citizens would have bought into the Singapore story, and they are likely to be impressed and confident about the status quo. We should not be surprised if they were more inclined towards the ruling party,' said Asst Prof Tan. But he qualified that one should not generalise new citizens as a whole, as some of them may take the stand that a one-party system was not sustainable in the long run.

The growing role of the social media realm, too, could play a part in this election.

Political commentator Gillian Koh noted how the government had loosened up on some of the rules regarding the use of social media when it comes to elections. For instance, political party podcasts and vodcasts, which were banned for the 2006 GE, will be allowed this time.

'(The PAP) recognised that far more younger people who are already very comfortable with the new media medium would just go straight online to get news. With the changes, the PAP can now respond and engage voters online as well,' said Dr Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

As many as 82 of the 87 parliamentary seats on offer at the May 7 poll could be thrown open to contest today on Nomination Day, meaning that the bulk of the eligible voters will be out in force to cast their ballots.

The government has amended the constitution to guarantee a minimum of nine opposition members - elected or non-constituency ones - in the next term of Parliament. Together with the nine Nominated MPs, the House will have a minimum of 18 non-PAP voices.

'Maybe what we are seeing is, for the first time, we are really having a real GE,' said Asst Prof Tan, alluding to the number of seats expected to be contested as well as the overall quality of the opposition slate this time round.

He added that, apart from having the opportunity to vote, many voters will be forced to think long and hard before coming to a decision on which candidate they would back.

'In the past, we may have had people who would have already made up their minds before the GE even started. This time, they are more willing to see what the different parties have to offer and only decide much later on,' he said.

The kinds of issues being thrust on the debating table are also all-encompassing and do not isolate any particular group from actively taking part in the discussions, said Dr Koh.

'You have the hot issue of foreigners, which involves jobs, wages, housing, transport, education and so on. For cost of living concerns, that too cuts across everything,' she said.