

Influx of foreigners the ‘mother of all issues’

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IMMIGRATION is likely to be a hot button issue in the general election campaign, some political observers said yesterday, after news broke that Nomination Day will be Sept 1 and Polling Day, Sept 11.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said the influx of foreigners into Singapore is the “mother of all issues”.

“That’s because people point to immigration as the cause of things such as high cost of living, high cost of transport, high property prices,” he said, adding that while property prices have stabilised, “they are at a high”.

Political analyst Derek da Cunha echoed this. “The Population White Paper of 2013 has really brought this issue to the fore. The different aspects over the changing nature of Singapore society due to the vast numbers of foreigners in Singapore, and the many more expected to emigrate here, will likely focus the minds of quite a number of voters,” he said.

Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, also said that it is “inevitable” that opposition parties will bring up the issue of immigration, and that it is not unanticipated.

But she added that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has taken pains to address immigration concerns and introduced a slew of measures to curtail the influx of foreigners. These include the cutting of foreign worker quotas for the services and marine sectors.

Associate Professor Tan, a former Nominated Member of Parliament, said the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) is likely to stress qualities like competence and integrity in the light of the Workers’ Party’s (WP’s) management of the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC).

In February, the Auditor General’s Office identified lapses in AHPETC’s accounting and governance practices, and found its accounts unreliable.

Analysts said that the PAP may be riding on a “feel-good” factor by calling the GE now, following several milestones such as the country’s recent 50th birthday and the national mourning of the passing of founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew on March 23.

Dr Koh said: “The timing shows that they would like to take advantage of the celebrations, the reminiscing of the passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew and perhaps, a flight to safety, with the global economy in stormy weather.”

The analysts said that while they had expected the election to be called soon, they were not expecting it to be held on a Friday as it has traditionally been held on Saturdays.

Alan Chong of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies speculated that Sept 11 could serve as a good international backdrop. This is because most of the First World will be remembering the tragic events of the terrorist attacks in the United States.

Prof Chong said that it would provide a backdrop for the ruling party to remind the electorate of global danger, and to vote wisely.

An estimated 2,460,977 Singaporeans will vote in the Sept 11 polls for 89 MPs in 16 group representation constituencies and 13 single-member constituencies.

In 2011, the PAP won 81 of the 87 seats. Its share of the national vote was 60.1 per cent, down from the 66.6 per cent at the 2006 General Election.

Former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong said he believes the PAP will, at best, garner “in the mid-sixties” of the votes.

Veteran opposition observer Wong Wee Nam believes that the ruling party will also rely more on door-to-door campaigning instead of mass rallies, where it may not draw a sizeable number of supporters.