

Bread-and-butter issues fill opposition manifestos

Parties get set to unveil manifestos, with most posting key topics online

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As the General Election inches closer, several opposition parties are putting the finishing touches to their manifestos, with most already highlighting their key campaign issues online.

Workers' Party chairman Sylvia Lim told The Straits Times yesterday that its manifesto is 'coming soon'.

She declined to say more, but at a political forum last week, she said the manifesto is being updated and will not depart much from that in the 2006 election.

A 'big part' of it will focus on making sure public transport fares remain affordable, she added.

The National Solidarity Party, on the other hand, said its manifesto has been printed and 'we're ready to rock and roll'.

It will be released after Parliament is dissolved, said its secretary-general Goh Meng Seng, who added that the cost of housing will be a key campaign issue.

Similarly, the Singapore Democratic Alliance will unfurl its manifesto after Parliament is dissolved. Topping its list of issues is the cost of living, said its secretary-general Desmond Lim.

Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) chief Chee Soon Juan did not respond to queries yesterday.

A source said the party is still working on policies in areas such as workers' rights and women's rights, and these will be released nearer the election.

The party has already released parts of its manifesto on its website, and published its Economic Alternative Programme and Shadow Budget in the past six months. Both documents delve into the party's economic proposals, such as introducing a minimum wage and a tiered goods and services tax system.

The Reform Party released its 19-point election manifesto two years ago. Mr Kenneth Jeyaretnam, its secretary-general, said the party has no plans to release a fuller document.

'Voters can read our blogs, press releases and articles online. Together with our 19 points, these give an idea of what we are about,' he added.

On the Internet, the parties have ramped up criticism of government policies while promoting their alternative solutions.

In a blog post this week, the SDP argued that existing social policies do not adequately help lower-income Singaporeans, and said that a minimum wage and a Singaporeans-first hiring policy would work better.

Mr Jeyaretnam also posted a comment on his personal blog two weeks ago, criticising the Government's immigration policy as too liberal. As a result, wages are not keeping up with inflation, he argued. He suggested investing in technology to boost the economy instead of relying on cheap foreign labour.

Political commentator and blogger Alex Au said opposition parties stand a 'fair chance' at gaining votes if they accomplish two things: Heighten a sense of protest on these issues, and convince voters they can pressure the Government to do a U-turn on policies.

'If they succeed, they can tell voters, vote us into Parliament, and we'll keep up the drumbeats,' he said.

Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said the opposition must also not fail to acknowledge that the Government has tried to address these issues.

She pointed to several recent measures taken to cool the housing market as well as to slow the influx of foreigners.

'If the opposition can first acknowledge these measures, look at the current context for these issues, and then take on the issues with their own analysis, I think voters will feel that that is the food for thought they crave as they go to the ballot box.'