

## **Green light for new media use at GE**

### **Campaigning using tools like Facebook among changes to election rules**

**Jeremy Au Yong & Tessa Wong**  
***The Straits Times***, 15 March 2011

Campaigning through new media tools such as Facebook, Twitter or podcasts - all banned at the 2006 General Election - will be fair game at the next polls.

This follows the significant easing yesterday of rules governing Internet election advertising.

Political observers believe the move means the next polls, expected within months, will be the most wired ones yet.

The loosening of rules is in line with the Government's 'light touch' regulatory approach, and follows changes to the Parliamentary Elections Act last year aimed at opening up political space.

Hong Kah GRC MP Zaqu Mohamad, a member of the People's Action Party's new media committee, said the revisions are a sign that the Government recognises the Internet's role in an election: 'The rules today are pretty much in sync with how new media is used in political campaigns in many parts of the world.'

So while the 2006 election saw incidents like the Singapore Democratic Party being asked to take podcasts off its website, the next polls will allow electioneering on nearly all new media platforms.

The changes also recognise that the online political scene has evolved and become increasingly active in recent years.

Both the opposition and PAP have experimented with new media tools and politicians use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs to reach out to residents.

The changes to the Parliamentary Elections (Election Advertising) Regulations gazetted yesterday more than doubled the items on the 'positive list' of permitted platforms. The old list featured only websites, chatrooms, forums, e-mail, SMS and Internet hyperlinks.

The changes affect political parties, candidates and election agents during the election period. This is the time between when nominations close and the eve of cooling-off day, which precedes the vote.

Election Department officials, who briefed reporters on the legislation, said the Government reviews such rules after every election, and that yesterday's changes were a result of that process.

Apart from rules on what can be done during the campaign, there is a raft of related changes. These include new reporting requirements for election spending; and allowing permanent residents or work permit holders to be contracted to put up posters and banners, and to set up stages and other election rally facilities.

But the bulk of the changes centres on use of new media in an election.

Parties, candidates and election agents will, for instance, be allowed to distribute video footage of election activities without first having to submit the footage to the Board of Film Censors.

Another change allows individuals who are not candidates or election agents to campaign more actively for a party or candidate, in a blog or on Twitter for instance - and to do so anonymously.

The list of items a political party might use to promote itself has also been expanded to include things like key chains, tissue packets, T-shirts and soft toys.

Previously, personal particulars were needed for all forms of advertising under a provision known as the 'authorship rule'. Election Department stickers with such details had to be placed on anything considered election advertising. But new media has made the authorship rule harder to enforce.

The changes now require candidates to make an early declaration of the platforms they own or control, and those they intend to use to campaign.

One other significant change in the regulations is the increase in the cap on election spending - from \$3 to \$3.50 per voter. It is the first such change since 2001 when the cap was increased by 50 cents.

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies said the changes are likely to encourage more parties to reach out to the Internet generation. But it remains to be seen if the next poll will be an Internet election: 'It's hard to tell... It depends on how the parties use the medium and whether the public gets heated up. The informed public will be trying to see the value-add of the content delivered by the new media. So they will see if it is more heat or light.'