

On the ground; GE2015: Top concerns likely bread-and-butter issues, immigration, say observers

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Observers say these issues are the ones most voters have on their minds

Bread-and-butter issues and immigration are likely to be at the top of the minds of most voters when they head to the polls on Sept 11.

Political observers say that concerns such as the rising cost of living, transport, housing, the economy, jobs and immigration, which is widely regarded as a key hot-button issue, are set to loom large at the hustings.

"The foreign talent issue is still there, especially for PMETs who want to see a greater reduction (in the level of foreign labour here)," said National University of Singapore political scientist Reuben Wong, using the acronym for professionals, managers, executives and technicians. "They will probably also have to deal with the whole debate about the transport infrastructure here... I'm sure the opposition will raise that at their rallies."

The view that voters will probably be focused on issues close to home comes as the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and the largest opposition party, the Workers' Party (WP), have tried to frame the general election in a different way.

The PAP has sought to highlight accounting and financial lapses at the WP's Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC) in recent years over the past few months. Several ministers have also said that the polls are about putting in place the right leaders to take Singapore forward. The WP's retort, however, has been to call on voters to elect more opposition MPs to ensure a more responsive government.

But experts say these issues may not be the game-changer that both sides are hoping for them to be. In fact, an over-emphasis on the AHPETC debacle may even backfire on the PAP, said Singapore Management University's Associate Professor Eugene Tan. "There may come a point when voters feel patronised and feel PAP is dictating to them how they should feel and respond to it," said Prof Tan, who feels the issue of leadership renewal may also not be high on voters' minds.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh has a different take. She noted that top issues cited by respondents in an IPS survey in the wake of the 2011 General Election included having efficient government, dealing with cost of living, having a check and balance in Parliament and the need for different views in Parliament.

And she feels that the election will be a good measure of voters' sentiment on some of these counts, including whether the Government has helped them "access and afford the key essentials in life" and given them "a stronger sense of security and assurance about work, family life and developing a fair and inclusive society".

News of the coming election also came as no surprise to eligible voters The Straits Times spoke to after the election date was announced.

Many, like Mr Robin Tan, 33, say they hope issues such as those relating to transport and cost of living will be raised during the hustings, which start on Sept 1. "I'd like to see how the Government will ease transportation woes, such as the breakdowns and congestion in the trains," said the IT manager.

Others such as financial consultant Geoffrey Ying, 44, are looking forward to hearing candidates speak on issues like heritage conservation. "There's a need to do something to conserve some places such as Bukit Brown because they're important to Singapore," he said.

As for Polling Day falling on Sept 11, the date came as a surprise to some who had expected it to be on Saturday, Sept 12. The past three general elections were on Saturdays.

Whether it is Sept 11 or 12, civil engineer V. Krishna, 79, is just glad the date is out. He said: "It's good that it's coming because over the last month we've had a lot of announcements and unveiling of candidates." Bank officer Marvin Quak, 27, said: "The date doesn't really matter. What matters is the election results."

ON POLLING DAY BEING SEPT 1

Based on what I see in the news, about SG50 and the passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, I think there will be an upside (in votes) for the Government. But the date doesn't really matter. What matters is the election results.

MR MARVIN QUAK (photo), 27, bank officer

The election date is not a surprise. We knew it was coming soon, whether it's Sept 11 or 12. It was a matter of time. It's good that it's in September, because over the last month we've had a lot of announcements and unveiling of candidates, so it's good that it's coming so we can get on with the world.

MR V. KRISHNA, 79, civil engineer

A SPECIAL YEAR TO VOTE

I've voted four or five times already, but this year is very special. The Government went all the way with the SG50 events and National Day.

And it is calling the elections in the same year.

MR ZULKEPLEY AWANG, 57, chauffeur

TRANSPORT CAN BE IMPROVED

I would like to see how the Government will ease transportation woes, such as the breakdowns and the congestion. The two are interlinked - if there are fewer breakdowns, there will also be less congestion.

MR ROBIN TAN, 33, IT manager

ON RELATING THE DATE FOR THE COMING ELECTIONS TO THE 9/11 TERRORIST ATTACKS

Sept 11 as Polling Day will take on added poignancy... I wouldn't be surprised if there was this subtext to it... especially when the PAP has got good marks for its handling of national security and multiracialism, as well as how well integrated Muslims (in Singapore) are.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR EUGENE TAN, Singapore Management University law don

ON HOW THE AHPETC DEBACLE WILL IMPACT THE WP'S CHANCES OF HOLDING ON TO ALJUNIED GRC

Their standing in Aljunied GRC will depend on whether voters there feel that it is the WP's inefficiency or even dishonesty in managing the GRC, or the PAP's persecution of them, or if the need for an opposition in Parliament overrides the local question of whether the town council is managed well and sustainably, too.

DR GILLIAN KOH, Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow

ON HOW THE PAP WILL FARE AT THE COMING POLLS, AFTER ITS MANDATE FELL FROM 66.6 PER CENT AT THE POLLS IN 2006, TO 60.1 PER CENT AT THE 2011 GENERAL ELECTION

I find it hard to imagine that the party would drop 6 percentage points again. It will probably even improve its vote share in quite a few GRCs.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR REUBEN WONG, NUS political scientist