

Opposition: PAP will have unfair edge

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Ruling party could disguise election pitch as news items, they claim

Singapore's opposition parties have unanimously opposed the proposal to have a 'cooling-off' day before Polling Day, during which no electoral campaigning will be allowed.

A number of them say the change will give the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) an unfair advantage through its use of the mass media.

Workers' Party chief Low Thia Khiang pointed out that the PAP can especially turn to TV to campaign, by disguising it as 'news' items from the Government.

'This will effectively give the ruling party an extra day of campaigning to the disadvantage of the opposition,' he said.

The opposition also argues that Singaporeans are rational voters and that opposition rallies are not prone to pose public disorder concerns.

PAP MPs, however, rebut the charge, saying the change is designed to benefit voters most, by giving them time to process information or messages received earlier during an intense campaign period.

They also urged the opposition to view the 'cooling-off' period as a necessity because the political scene looks set to hot up, with the implementation of several political changes announced in May.

The two sides were responding to the 'cooling-off' proposal announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Monday, after the Commonwealth leaders meeting in Trinidad and Tobago.

The idea has been discussed for several years, he said, but the decision to go ahead with it came after his May announcement that revised the Non-Constituency MP, Nominated MP and Group Representation Constituency schemes.

These changes will give at least 18 seats in Parliament to non-PAP members. Some analysts expect them to intensify the contest for seats in the coming general election - a key factor that triggered the new proposal, they said.

Mr Lee gave two reasons for the latest move: One, to allow voters, after an exciting campaign, to reflect calmly on the arguments made, and to go to the polls in a steady state of mind. Two, to lower the risk of public disorder.

Currently, campaigning can take place from Nomination Day to the eve of Polling Day.

But with the 'cooling-off' day, mass rallies, door-to-door visits and the wearing of party logos and symbols will not be allowed on the eve.

There is one exception: Political parties can still give their traditional TV broadcast on the eve, making one last pitch to voters.

This, plus news reporting on the election, will not be affected.

But Mr Low of the Workers' Party believes this would give the PAP an edge.

'For instance, if opposition parties campaign on issues of health care and public housing policy and managed to get the message across to the voters, the government department or relevant civil servants can always come out on the day of the cooling period with some announcement of policy changes or explanation to counter what opposition parties said during the campaign period, in an attempt to sway public opinion,' he said.

'The mass media can also run a 'story' for the same effect without the need for any PAP candidate to appear,' he added.

Dismissing his fears, Mr Yeo Guat Kwang, PAP MP for Aljunied GRC, which was fiercely contested in the 2006 polls, said the mass media had been fair and balanced in its election coverage.

Fellow Aljunied MP Zainul Abidin Rasheed felt the change would be fair to all. However, he added, the PAP will have to ensure the new system is also seen to be fair. One way, he suggested, is for PAP ministers and MPs to stop making speeches that would be seen as indirect 'campaigning'.

The exceptions, he said, would be for events fixed long before the election date was announced, especially international events that cannot be postponed.

Mr Low also said PM Lee's concerns over public disorder is an 'over-imagination', noting that assigning each party a stadium for their supporters to gather prevents such potential problems.

But Mr Ong Kian Min, PAP MP for Tampines GRC, argues that the long-running political strife in Thailand shows Singapore cannot take for granted the calm it has seen in recent elections.

Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said the key factors behind the change are the growing influence of the Internet and the more intense contest for seats with the new political schemes.

She also said the change will benefit all political parties who would then 'focus on presenting their closing arguments in the party's political broadcasts on the 'cooling-off' day'.

However, voters interviewed do not see the need for the 'cooling-off' day, saying they would have made their decision long before Polling Day.

Mr Ahmad Fadil, 30, an IT executive who voted in Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC in the 2006 election, added: 'I don't think Singaporeans are that passionate about politics compared to our neighbours.

'They just want the election to end quickly, find out who won and get on with their lives.'