

## **Political parties prepare for hustings amid new campaigning guidelines**

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Political parties began gearing up for the hustings yesterday, after the Elections Department (ELD) announced its preliminary campaigning guidelines.

Analysts reckon the ELD's release of campaigning guidelines means the next general election is imminent. This would see it held in phase two of Singapore's reopening, which begins today.

Asked for comment, a spokesman for the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) said: "As the guidelines have only just been issued by the ELD, we will study the details closely and will adhere to them fully."

Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP Zainal Sapari said candidates would have to "think out of the box" to engage voters given how the elections have become an "online contest". He cited how he has held webinars and Zoom sessions, adding that residents are getting used to them.

Opposition party leaders welcomed the increased airtime on national television for candidates, even as they raised concerns about the loss of in-person rallies. Many of them said the move to grant three minutes to every candidate on national television would provide a good platform for them to increase the reach of their messages.

Mr Lim Tean, secretary-general of People's Voice, said: "For SMC (single-member constituency) candidates to be given three minutes, that's excellent."

Similarly, People's Power Party chief Goh Meng Seng said the new constituency political broadcasts would shift the focus to the quality of each candidate, rather than the party branding.

"If you have more direct engagement from the candidates through the mass media to say their piece on national airways, it will actually make parties more serious in fielding their candidates. We now have to open our eyes and ears to vote, instead of being distracted by party branding during rallies," he said.

Mr Goh said the measures also level the playing field for smaller parties, and lower the barrier of entry due to the lower costs.

Mr Jose Raymond, chairman of the Singapore People's Party, similarly said it was good for parties to be given the time, though he wanted to know how the timing of the broadcasts would be decided. The ELD has said it will release more details at a later date.

The Workers' Party, the largest opposition party here, said it is "currently studying the guidelines".

Other party leaders said the loss of physical rallies would disadvantage opposition parties - a point some analysts concurred with.

The Singapore Democratic Party said the moves "benefit the ruling party because the opposition cannot hold our traditional rallies which are crucial opportunities to communicate directly with voters".

"Ground activities are also restricted to small groups which will hamper effective outreach and communication," it added.

National University of Singapore political science don Bilveer Singh said the PAP "does very badly in rallying", adding: "The only way the opposition is able to compensate (for their disadvantage)... is to see shifts on the ground in the nine days of campaigning."

Dr Felix Tan, an associate lecturer at SIM Global Education, noted that some opposition parties have grown their reach on social media, which could lessen the blow of not having physical rallies.

Institute of Policy Studies' deputy director for research Gillian Koh felt the shift to online campaigning could tilt the playing field towards less-well-resourced parties.

"The bigger and well-resourced (political parties) were more able to do the mass public rallies. Now they can't," she said. "Now, the smaller ones can run their campaign rallies out of their party premises."

Providing venues for parties to live-stream their e-rallies is also an attempt to make the process fairer, she added.

Mr Zulkifli Baharudin, a former Nominated MP, bemoaned the absence of physical rallies.

"They generate discussion across the whole island. It's almost a festive occasion... I go there because I want to know what everyone else is talking about. You feel the pulse.

"My sense is that the (broadcasts and e-rallies) won't generate that same level of discussion," he added.