

Rising costs on many voters' minds this time

Chua Mui Hoong and Teo Wan Gek
The Straits Times, 7 May 2011

Cost of living is a perennial concern in every general election. In 2006, it certainly featured in opposition rallies.

But while it sizzled at opposition rallies, it may not have featured much in people's voting decisions then.

A post-election survey from the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), in fact, found that concerns about living costs or what IPS fellow Gillian Koh called 'personal pocketbook issues' were not a big factor. Instead, people considered efficiency of government and fair policies as more important.

This was borne out by The Straits Times' own snapshot street poll of 100 opposition voters at that time. Cost of living did not feature in the top three reasons cited for voting for the opposition.

This general election, however, could turn out to be different.

For one thing, inflation topped 5 per cent in March. Global concerns about rising food and oil prices dovetailed with rising prices of domestic housing.

Speaking for many, housewife Shirley Ang, 57, in East Coast GRC, said: 'Prices have gone up, GST as well. We now cope by eating out less often and cook more at home.

'Health-care costs have gone up. Hopefully such costs can be subsidised for the elderly who have chronic illnesses such as hypertension.'

Opposition candidates have highlighted the issue in rallies, accusing the People's Action Party of jacking up the goods and services tax (GST) after the 2006 elections.

They warned of more price increases after this general election.

In 2006, prices rose after the May elections, prompting a letter writer to The Business Times, Mr Leong Sze Hian, to say: 'Since May, there have been increases, in chronological order, in electricity, taxi fares, electronic road pricing, F&B prices due to the higher rentals of upgraded food centres, university fees, development charge for non-landed residential sites, bus and MRT fares, and HDB one-room and two-room rentals.'

While concerned about rising costs, several voters also said their incomes had gone up.

Hawker Wong Mun Fong, 50, who has a stall at Tampines, said: 'My costs have increased, but the number of people eating my rojak has increased more.'

While cost of living is a red-hot issue, it is uncertain how this will affect votes. Maintenance officer Ahmad Fuzie, 38, lives in a three-room flat in Aljunied GRC with his wife and two young children. He earns \$1,400. After deducting Central Provident Fund contributions, he has a take-home pay of \$1,100.

While worried about costs, he said of the opposition: 'How capable is the opposition? We don't know yet. They make promises, but this is my life you are talking about.'

'The prices of everything are going up. It has become so costly to live in Singapore. But compared with other countries, we are much better off.'

Ms Florence Tan, 60, general manager, Aljunied GRC resident