

## **Singapore GE2020: The fight for votes heats up as it goes virtual and social**

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In an unprecedented move, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong addressed Singaporeans live - including on social media - on why he was calling the general election amid a pandemic.

He revealed that he had met President Halimah Yacob and advised her to dissolve Parliament and call an election, so that Singaporeans could decide who they want at the helm to lead them through the looming economic storm.

PM Lee took to social media, too, on Saturday when he launched the People's Action Party (PAP) manifesto in a 22-minute live stream on YouTube and Facebook.

This new approach might be a sign of how Singapore's coming general election could well be its first truly Internet election, with the Covid-19 pandemic accelerating the shift to digital among both voters and candidates seeking to win their support.

Previous elections, in 2011 and 2015, had been touted as online affairs, with the rise of alternative websites and social media.

But that proved not to be the case when the hustings came round, with canvassing on the ground and nightly rallies holding sway in shaping voters' decisions.

The established media held its own in being the news source of choice for most people in the previous two polls, as studies later showed.

Over the past week since the election was called, the online space has been filled with video clips and WhatsApp messages on parties holding dialogues and introducing candidates, as well as an assortment of memes, pictures, cartoons and videos which seek to shape opinions and push messages related to the coming polls.

The Internet election has arrived.

### **SIMPLER, SHORTER, SHARPER**

Pundits had said that an online election would give smaller, less established parties a boost, since they would have greater reach and more direct access to voters, without the need for intermediaries.

This time round, given the new campaign rules and the need for social distancing, all parties have to work around the lack of physical events such as mass rallies and large-scale walkabouts, forcing a greater reliance on digital efforts to connect with voters.

Some have looked to e-rallies to replace old-style ones.

Others view dialogue via digital platforms as an alternative to in-person sessions with the prospective candidates.

But simpler, shorter and more immediate forms of online communication - from slickly produced videos, to memes meant to amuse or even mock political opponents, to images intended to shape perceptions and hopefully go viral in the process - are becoming the new political currency, as was always envisaged in earlier discussions of what an Internet election might look like.

## **EARLY MOMENTUM**

Parties of all stripes have jumped into the digital fray.

PAP leaders have been assiduously posting on their Facebook pages, putting up photos, screengrabs and videos of their grassroots activities.

Several of its top leaders also took to the airwaves to deliver a series of national broadcasts, engaging Singaporeans on the challenges they see ahead in the face of one of the country's worst crises, and what they think should be done about it.

On the opposition side, the Workers' Party (WP) posted a 15-second video clip on its social media platforms, with photos of 12 of its candidates, both familiar and fresh faces, in quick succession, soon after the much-anticipated election was called.

The tag said simply - GE 2020: Coming Soon.

The next day, at lunchtime, the party released a six-minute video in which the 12 candidates spoke about their outreach and groundwork over the years, and highlighted the need for greater diversity in Parliament.

That same evening, the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) followed up its surprise morning announcement that Mr Lee Hsien Yang had joined the party, with a clip of the Prime Minister's estranged brother telling Singaporeans they can "love Singapore, and yet to not vote PAP".

The WP's clips have drawn more than 700,000 views and counting, and the PSP's has been viewed more than 380,000 times.

In comparison, PM Lee's address to the nation on why he was calling the election now has drawn more than 710,000 views on Facebook.

It was also aired on TV and radio.

In the past few days, parties have also been taking to the digital space to unveil their candidates, since live in-person sessions cannot be held.

The PAP, for instance, has held seven sessions to introduce its new faces, now totalling 26, while the WP has introduced 18 candidates in four sessions.

Nine of them are newcomers.

While younger members of the PAP team have stepped up their online engagement in recent weeks, such as fitness buffs Baey Yam Keng and Cheng Li Hui taking to platforms like Facebook and TikTok to share live videos of themselves doing exercises like piloxing during the circuit breaker, observers also point to the series of short videos put out in the last two weeks that do not overtly bear the PAP's stamp.

The six videos, directed by local film-makers like Royston Tan, spotlight different groups of Singaporeans who have been affected by the pandemic, their resilience in the face of adversity, and assistance measures by the Government.

The series, which was also aired on TV, culminated in a 21/2-minute clip titled Rebuilding Singapore, that was put up on the Gov.sg Facebook page on the morning of June 23, the day the Writ of Election was issued.

Other parties have also been experimenting with outreach via various platforms, from podcasts for the Singapore People's Party to an Ask Me Anything question-and-answer session by the Singapore Democratic Party on discussion platform Reddit, with varying degrees of success.

### **COMPRESSED HUSTINGS**

That political parties are reaching out to the electorate with such intensity online should not be a surprise, said Associate Professor Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University's School of Law.

The circuit breaker period had disrupted many parties' campaigning plans, while compressing the voter outreach schedule from months into mere weeks, he noted.

The lack of rallies and scaled-down community walkabouts mean parties see a need to use different online platforms to capture as much voter attention and interest as they can, said Prof Tan.

Some parties have been more successful than others, said observers.

The Reform Party experienced technical glitches in its first online "Meet-the-People" session earlier this month, which forced organisers to use a game streaming platform to carry out the rest of the live session.

ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute senior fellow Norshahril Saat said the approach taken by the major parties has been consistent with past elections, with the PAP being more traditional in its candidate introductions, and opposition parties, like the WP, more willing to explore new approaches.

Many parties, including the smaller ones, are seeing the value in organising online events as the alternative would be invisibility, particularly due to safe campaigning rules for this electoral cycle, said Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Carol Soon.

Video recordings also have a long tail and can continue to draw eyeballs even after an event has ended, she noted.

## **CONSISTENT VERSUS FLASHY**

While a weak online presence would disadvantage parties, analysts cautioned against drawing a link between, say, how widely viewed a video is and whether that will translate into actual votes.

For instance, the WP's videos "may be very nice and very beautiful, people keep sharing it on Facebook and Instagram, but it doesn't necessarily mean voters are voting the WP because the video looks good", said Dr Felix Tan, associate lecturer at SIM Global Education.

And while they seldom generate hype, PAP MPs' consistent and dominant presence in the online sphere since at least 2015 should not be discounted, noted observers, who pointed to IPS research following GE2015 that showed a normalisation of the digital space in recent years to match the stature and reach of parties in the real world.

"It's too early to make a call, and I don't think view counts really matter," said Dr Norshahril.

"The medium itself is a factor and political parties have to be creative in the way they reach out to different segments of society, but I think what's more important is whether voters buy your message."

The success of some strategies over others indicates the importance of short and sharp messaging, which better resonates with young people and caters to today's shorter attention spans, said Dr Norshahril.

Observers like media specialist Steve Dawson said parties should not think they have to dumb down their messaging of nuanced issues for voters because it is the Internet.

"Quite the opposite. The more controlled the environment, the more able the audience is to absorb complex content," he said.

"In a stadium environment, the audience can't absorb any more than headline information because there are so many distractions around them."

## **VIEWER BEWARE**

But parties still need to find ways to go beyond the Internet, or risk reaching only the tech-savvy portion of the electorate, he added.

With an Internet-focused election at hand, Singapore's political leaders have also warned of the danger of foreign intervention, such as the use of fake news, trolls, hacks and leaks to sow dissension and cynicism.

Noting that the Internet has "turbocharged this kind of interference", and that developed countries such as France, Germany and the United States have been targeted by such attacks, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam told The Straits Times last week it would be foolish for Singapore - and parties here - not to take steps to deal with the threat.

Commentators also noted the speed at which ground sentiment can gather force, particularly with the viral nature of posts and messages, often anonymously written, that can be forwarded across cyberspace.

PAP new face Ivan Lim, for instance, had been the focus of several negative comments online since he was introduced last Wednesday.

He was accused of elitist behaviour during a military exercise and being arrogant, among other criticisms, even as others who know him spoke up for him.

The online storm led to Mr Lim pulling out of the election, to prevent becoming a distraction from the larger issues, he said.

In doing so, he became the first casualty of the online election, and is perhaps not the last.

## **ON THE GROUND**

As the campaign heats up in the coming days, parties will find it more difficult to stand out in the online sphere as the amount and volume of campaign messaging gets ramped up across various fronts, said analysts.

Ironically, this will emphasise the importance of balancing voter engagement not just online, but also in traditional media and face-to-face interactions, said SMU's Prof Tan.

"In that way, this election is a very tough one because candidates have to walk the ground, command the online sphere and also engage with the mainstream media," he said.

A party that can take an even-handed approach to the three broad mediums will be more likely to get their message out to as wide an audience and as many in the electorate as possible, while ignoring any of the three means candidates risk neglecting certain vote banks, said Prof Tan.

"Parties must be mindful that they can't continue to string voters along with jazzy videos, because ultimately, this is not a popularity contest and voters are not going to judge you on how creative you are in your online campaigning."

He added: "Ultimately, most voters will come to grips with the issues, and if a party's platform does not go beyond entertainment, then their message may not prevail when it comes to the crunch."