

GE: 3-cornered fights can be good

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Three-cornered electoral fights -- long considered the bane of the Opposition's bid to enter Parliament -- could actually benefit the country in the long term, some political observers say.

This so, even as jockeying intensifies among Opposition parties, with talk of even four-cornered fights emerging.

While conventional wisdom dictates that three-cornered fights dilute Opposition votes and cede the battle to the ruling party, the upside is that the electorate becomes more discerning -- by being exposed to Opposition candidates of varying quality, said political analyst Eugene Tan.

Looking at elections in "binary terms" -- the People's Action Party versus the Opposition -- paints the Opposition as a "homogeneous entity", said the Singapore Management University law lecturer.

A three-cornered fight could also provide a more accurate gauge of each Opposition candidate's relative strengths, even as it becomes easier to enter Parliament with the introduction of more Non-Constituency Members of Parliament for the coming General Election (GE).

In the next GE, the stronger party can then make a legitimate claim to contest a particular seat or more seats, said assistant professor Tan.

The Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA), for one, welcomes multi-cornered contests. Its secretary-general Desmond Lim said such contests "give people more choices".

SDA is contesting Punggol East and Sengkang West, which the Workers' Party has also eyed.

"Everyone has the right to stand for their principle, share their opinion and stand for what they advocate," Mr Lim said.

For instance, the SDA does not support a minimum wage despite the perception that most Opposition parties do.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said ideally, three-cornered fights signify the maturing process of Singapore's democratic society, with each party presenting voters with different takes on policies and interests.

She said: "The onus really lies on voters -- when faced with many parties, will they feel too overwhelmed to understand the full range and find it is safer to swing back to the incumbent"?

Other political parties are, however, less enthusiastic about multi-cornered fights, presumably preferring to resolve the issue through horse-trading.

In the short term, it made sense for the parties to conserve resources and to agree to concentrate on the areas where they are strongest, said Reform Party secretary-general Kenneth Jeyaretnam.

If a three-cornered fight led to one Opposition party faring so badly that it loses its election deposit, it would also damage the overall image of the Opposition, said political risk consultant Azhar Ghani.