

GE may not be held when everyone's expecting it: PM

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Speculation over when Singapore's next General Election (GE) will be held went up a notch yesterday, after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that it might not happen "when everybody is expecting it".

The general sentiment among political watchers is that the GE could be held in early 2016, although the Singapore Democratic Party announced last week that it will be ramping up its preparations in anticipation of the elections being called as early as the second quarter of next year.

Speaking to Singapore media on the sidelines of an ASEAN-Korea summit, Mr Lee was asked about the timing of the next GE, which is due by January 2017.

Giving little away, Mr Lee said there are several considerations. "It depends on what is happening in the world, if a major crisis is coming up then we have to clear that," he said.

"It also depends on other agenda which we are busy with ... for example, next year there is SG50. We will have to take all this into account and make soundings and choose the right moment. Not necessarily when everybody is expecting it."

He said the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) is working hard preparing for the GE. "When we're ready we will call, as soon as we're ready."

The PAP held a party conference and rally on Sunday, where Mr Lee rallied some 6,000 party activists, calling the coming contest a "deadly serious fight" that his party must win convincingly. He also said the party had identified many promising candidates, including a few potential office holders, for the next GE.

Political analysts saw Mr Lee's latest comments as a tactic to throw his political opponents off-guard. By and large, they still expect the next GE to be held after the SG50 celebrations next year — not too soon after lest the PAP be seen as capitalising on the feel-good factor, but not too long before the emotional high diminishes.

Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, noted that the Government had announced several policy reforms that are in the works, including the MediShield Life scheme, which provides lifelong universal healthcare coverage and will be rolled out at the end of next year. As such, calling the elections early will not be to the ruling party's advantage, she noted.

"It's the PM's prerogative to call the election, but you would think the PAP would wait for the benefits of the policy reforms to be felt before they call an election. The PAP wants to prove that it serves the people and it is responsive to their needs and concerns."

Apart from the factors cited by Mr Lee and practical issues such as avoiding school holidays and religious festivals, the analysts said the strength of the economy will also be on Mr Lee's mind in deciding when to call for polls.

Former Nominated Member of Parliament Siew Kum Hong said: "If the global economy is growing, Singapore would be doing well as well. People will vote the PAP because they think it's a safe bet ... Right now, only the United States is growing. All other economies are struggling."

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan added that the ruling party would also want to use the element of surprise. "It's in the best interest of all parties to ramp up their preparations. No one, besides PM Lee and his inner circle, knows when it'll be, but we are certainly on the threshold of what promises to be an extended period of informal campaigning," he said.