

## No fixed rally sites, but more TV airtime for candidates

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SINGAPORE — As rallies may be divisive and run contrary to the unifying role of a President, the Government announced yesterday that it would no longer designate any rally sites during Presidential Elections, and would look into offering candidates more airtime on television, for instance.

Speaking in Parliament during the second reading of the Presidential Elections (Amendment) Bill, Mr Chan Chun Sing, who is Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, reiterated a constitutional commission's view that there should be a difference in the campaign methods for Presidential Elections (PEs) and General Elections.

The Constitutional Commission — which was tasked to review specific aspects of the Elected Presidency scheme — stated in its report last year that unlike in Parliamentary elections, candidates running for President have no policy agenda to advance.

There is little need for the vigorous contest of ideas that takes place during a Parliamentary election, they said.

Agreeing with this, Mr Chan said: "Campaign methods for PEs must not inflame emotions and must be in keeping with the decorum and dignity of the office of the President, given the important unifying and custodial roles of the President."

Candidates may still hold rallies if they wish, but they will have to apply to the police for a permit and the application will be assessed based on public order and security considerations.

To encourage the use of other avenues to "reach out to voters at a national level", the Government will increase the amount of television airtime for candidates and it will study different options to achieve this. More details will be announced later.

Candidates may use social media platforms to reach voters and also hold indoor private sessions to engage specific groups of voters, Mr Chan said.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said that doing away with rally sites sent a signal that the PE is a "wholly different creature" from the General Elections.

He also said that it might be hard to "sustain the crowd's interest and energy level" when the candidates cannot address policy matters.

"I think (the Government is) trying to signal that maybe, rallies are not the best way to reach out to Singaporeans," he added.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director for research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that such a move levels the playing field for candidates who might not be as well-resourced. It also lowers the threshold of how much money a candidate needs to run the campaign for an outreach that he or she would like, she added.

However, SIM Global Education political commentator Felix Tan said that the proposal of other avenues might lead some people to accuse the Government of favouring one candidate over another when certain government-linked organisations allow a particular candidate to use their venues.