

## Opposition not taken off guard, say analysts

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While time is of the essence in the period between the dissolution of Parliament yesterday and Polling Day on Sept 11, political analysts said opposition parties should not feel they have been caught off guard by the writ of election issued yesterday.

This is because of “soft-electioneering” by the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) in recent months, they said.

“The official announcement of the GE (General Election) is almost an anticlimax,” said National University of Singapore political scientist Hussin Mutalib. Taking the PAP’s cues, the Opposition has been carrying out its own preparations and many Singaporeans have been waiting for the September date to be announced and the “excitement” of the rallies to begin, he said.

At the PAP60 Party Rally in December last year, PAP secretary-general Lee Hsien Loong had framed the coming GE as a “deadly serious fight” that his party must win convincingly. He had also said the elections would be about who forms the Government and not merely how many seats the Opposition captures, and that Singapore’s future and society are at stake.

With Mr Lee also highlighting, on a separate occasion, the factors he would take into consideration when picking a time for the elections, the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) wasted little time and launched its GE campaign in January.

“Opposition parties were calling for early notice of the boundaries, but ... SDP wasn’t waiting for that to prepare itself and the ground,” said Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh.

The Workers’ Party (WP) has also made preparations, with its members and potential candidates working the ground, knocking on doors and trying to understand voters’ concerns, she added.

“After the half-time mark of Parliament, I think there was a lot of talk about being in the ‘home stretch’. And so if the parties know that they must get their brands and their candidates out and for voters to identify with them and their manifestos, there is no way they will feel that they have been caught flat-footed,” said Dr Koh.

There has long been the suspicion that a GE could be called on the back of SG50 celebrations, she said. “Those like me who are more focused on policymaking and implementation were thinking that it would be important for the effects of these policy reforms to be properly felt before the ground would be sweet and the incumbent governing party would call the election.”

Singapore Management University’s associate professor of law Eugene Tan felt opposition parties will now have to hit the ground running in double time to catch up with the PAP’s head start.

The WP and SDP have come across as being the best-prepared among opposition parties, he said.

The National Solidarity Party (NSP) is hobbled by internal divisions, while the smaller and newer parties look “under-resourced and will have to scale up dramatically to cope with the demands of the campaign trail”, he said.

Two members of the NSP’s central executive committee resigned in the past week and two were hit by poison-pen content online. The newer parties in this GE include the Singaporeans First party and the People’s Power Party.

Assoc Prof Hussin said the key battle grounds will continue to be on the eastern side of Singapore, from Aljunied to Marine Parade, Tampines and East Coast group representation constituencies.