

Will the GE be held in 2019 or 2020? We look at the case for each

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Amid earlier speculation that snap polls could be held this year, political analysts are divided on whether this year's Budget provided sufficient hints of an imminent General Election (GE).

Traditionally, the presence of Budget goodies has been seen by some as an indication of an impending GE, with the Government sharing its surpluses with the people before its current term is up.

While Budget 2019 contained what the analysts described as "generous" measures, some of those interviewed by TODAY expect the GE to be held next year, following a string of incidents since the turn of the year which could have affected public confidence.

These included the death of actor Aloysius Pang, which was the fourth NS training fatality in 16 months, SingPost's postal service lapses, and the leak of confidential information of 14,200 individuals diagnosed with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

While the Government has acted quickly to address the lapses, the analysts noted that it would take time to restore public confidence.

Murdoch University's Associate Professor Terence Lee, who researches Singapore and Malaysia politics, said he believed the Government had initially crafted Budget 2019 with a GE in mind, but had second thoughts after the recent incidents.

"By not making it (an election Budget) so conspicuous, the Government gives itself some leeway to shift (the GE) to a later date... if it deems it necessary," Assoc Prof Lee said.

The next GE must be held by early 2021. There have been recent hints that the People's Action Party (PAP) Government will not be calling for polls this year, some analysts said.

For example, at a ministerial walkabout the last weekend, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said that the fourth-generation (4G) leaders will complete the 90 ministerial visits to cover all constituencies by about May next year. They have only done 30 visits for now.

Still, the PAP Government's decision to call an election does not hinge on the completion of these visits, pointed out Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie, a Singaporean political analyst at the Education University of Hong Kong.

A day after delivering the Budget speech, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat was asked during a live televised forum whether it was an "election Budget".

Adding that he does not plan the government's budgets on such a basis, he replied: "It's not about, 'Okay, we are near the election, therefore let's spend this and let's spend that'... I think we have a responsibility to our future generation."

Former PAP Member of Parliament (MP) Inderjit Singh noted, however, that the Budget had some "big-ticket goodies" that could set tongues wagging.

The S\$8 billion Merdeka Generation Package and the S\$1.1 billion Bicentennial Bonus could be enough to sweeten the ground, and the Government could well capitalise on a possible change in the public mood to call a GE later this year, he said.

OCBC Bank economist Selena Ling, however, did not think these measures amounted to a pre-election sweetener.

Rather, it was a “general, crowd-pleasing expansionary Budget” that addressed familiar and wide-ranging topics from security to healthcare costs, she said.

After dishing out big-ticket items such as the Merdeka Generation Package and the Bicentennial bonus, the PAP Government would still have a huge surplus.

This has led some to suggest that the GE could be held next year.

But Singapore Management University’s political scientist Eugene Tan said: “Voters like a generous budget but they are sensitive and will not take it well if it is seen as pork-barrel politics.”

Why GE could be held in 2019

- Passing the baton to the 4G:

A major Cabinet reshuffle is expected soon after Budget 2019, with 4G leaders taking on heavier responsibilities, including the Deputy Prime Minister portfolios.

The PAP Government might well prefer to hold the GE this year to complete its leadership transition and allow the younger leaders to start focusing on executing their plans for the future sooner rather than later, the analysts said.

Asst Prof Woo said that securing a mandate as early as possible would benefit the 4G leaders, as they have to deal with some “very difficult policy issues in the coming years”, such as the Goods and Services Tax hike, ongoing disputes with Malaysia as well as an ongoing trade war that could dampen Singapore’s economy. “Stimulating growth and transforming the economy will require the government’s full attention, without the distraction of a GE,” he added.

- Hot button issues have subsided:

The PAP Government has to a certain extent addressed problems and public discontent in the realms of education, transport and housing policies, said Asst Prof Woo. But SIM Global Education’s Dr Tan said that while the issue of rail reliability has “subsided a little”, there are still lingering concerns over the train system as a majority of Singaporeans rely on it as a major mode of transportation. “While it’s good to know that the issue has somewhat abated, it is far from resolved,” he added.

- Merdeka Generation Package and Bicentennial commemoration:

The Merdeka Generation Package will likely contribute to stronger support for the PAP among some quarters of this generation, Asst Prof Woo said.

“This is not simply a matter of fiscal handouts, but also an expression of the government's appreciation for their role in nation-building as well,” he added.

There is also Singapore's bicentennial commemoration this year, though analysts pointed out that this will not generate the kind of patriotic fervour as the SG50 celebration.

“Singapore's colonial history, while emphasised in history books, does not resonate as deeply as our independence in the minds of most,” said Asst Prof Woo.

Why GE could be held in 2020

- Recent lapses have made it politically less expedient for an election to be called this year:

It would be “definitely safer” to hold the polls next year when public dissatisfaction with the incidents “have faded away or are at least not as strong”, said Asst Prof Woo. Similarly, Assoc Prof Tan said that the Government needs time to build up trust and confidence, by convincing Singaporeans that the chances of such incidents recurring would be very low. “With proper closure on what were the causes, the remedial actions taken and future safeguards in place, these might help to reduce the political sensitivity,” said Assoc Prof Tan.

- Sufficient time for Health Minister Gan Kim Yong to work through issues at Health Ministry (MOH):

The MOH has been dogged by several issues of late, including the SingHealth cyber attack last year and the more recent HIV data leak.

There was also the hepatitis C outbreak in 2015. It affected 25 patients, with the virus directly causing or contributing to seven deaths.

In the previous GE held in 2015, then-Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew announced a month before the polls that he was quitting politics.

The transport portfolio was seen as a poisoned chalice at that time, with the MRT system plagued by reliability problems.

Analysts noted that Mr Gan was unlikely to follow Mr Lui's footsteps as he is seen as a party stalwart, and part of the 4G leadership — having recently been elected as chairman of a new-look PAP Central Executive Committee.

- Longer runway for 4G leaders to prepare:

SIM Global Education associate lecturer Felix Tan said a 2020 GE would give the younger leaders more time to outline their vision and plans to Singaporeans and build up public trust in them.

In particular, Mr Heng, who has been earmarked to succeed Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, would need time to establish his own team.

Mr Heng, who was appointed as the PAP's First Assistant Secretary-General in November last year, is expected to become Deputy Prime Minister in the impending Cabinet reshuffle.

While PM Lee has indicated that he will step down after the next GE, Mr Heng has been increasingly coming to the fore. Earlier this month, Mr Heng responded to a Lianhe Zaobao editorial, which pointed to complacency as one reason for a spate of lapses such as the NS training deaths, SingHealth cyber attack and the HIV data leak. On Dec 31 last year, he also accompanied Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean to call on Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad over recent bilateral disagreements.

- Replacement anchor ministers needed in East Coast, Jalan Besar GRCs:

Following the retirement of Mr Lim Swee Say and Dr Yaacob Ibrahim from Cabinet, there are no full ministers helming these two Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs). Ministers to be re-deployed to these GRCs will need time to walk the ground.

- A spanner in the works for opposition parties:

Some opposition parties have already started their ground work, while others are due to launch their election campaigns soon. While holding the GE later could mean more preparation time for the opposition parties, they could also lose their steam if the polls are held next year — handing the PAP an advantage, the analysts noted.

- Need time for measures to sink in:

Institute of Policy Studies' deputy director of research Gillian Koh said the Government might want to allow the benefits of the Merdeka Generation Package and the extension of the Community Health Assist Scheme to be felt on the ground before it calls an election. After all, members of the Merdeka Generation will only receive their cards this June.

Wild card: the economy

- Economy could worsen next year:

The Singapore economy has yet to feel the full impact of the ongoing trade war between the United States and China. But things could take a turn for the worse next year.

A dire economic situation could be a double-edged sword for the PAP Government, the analysts said.

It could invoke a “flight to safety” mentality among voters who want a tried-and-tested party to steer the country's economy.

But Mr Singh pointed out: “If the economy is in a deep downturn, things can backfire if people get upset that the Government failed to strengthen the economy.”

The trade war situation is still unclear at this juncture, said Ms Ling.

Nonetheless, the upside of a prolonged trade war could see more foreign direct investments and manufacturing activities diverted to Southeast Asia and Singapore, she added. “Multinational companies may choose to diversify away from China to avoid tariffs or backlash from the US for strategic industries,” she noted.