

Fewer goodies = no election?

Observers divided on whether general election will be held this year after Budget

Shree Ann Mathavan, Liew Hanqing

The New Paper, 24 February 2010

FEW goodies out of the Budget for individuals, so no election, right?

If only it was that easy.

There was anticipation. Before the Budget was announced, the buzz on the ground was that 2010 was going to be an election year.

So why this belief that Budget hongbao equals election year?

It happened in the last three elections - in 1997, 2001 and 2006.

But it's not so clear cut.

The New Paper spoke to political observers and they were divided on what the Budget means in terms of a looming election.

Former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong, 35, a corporate counsel, believes that it's not an election Budget. There were not many "direct goodies" for the average Singaporean, he said.

"There is a lot of tweaking and expansion of existing schemes but nothing dramatic," he said.

"So I don't think it's an election Budget as traditionally perceived."

This year's Budget, for instance, did not see anything like 2006's \$2.6 billion Progress Package, he said.

Assistant professor of economics Davin Chor from the Singapore Management University agreed with Mr Siew that Budget 2010 is "not a typical election-year budget" as there appears to be few obvious ground-sweeteners like government payouts.

He said: "I am doubtful elections will happen this year. The Budget laid out has medium- to long-term goals.

"I would think the Government would like to see some of the fruits from this productivity drive realised before going to the voters."

But less "hongbao" does not necessarily rule out an election being held this year, Mr Siew noted.

"The Government's strategy is long-term and directed at making Singapore a better place, so I wouldn't rule out elections just because there are no blockbuster handouts," he said.

He also pointed out that such handouts may not necessarily sweeten the ground for elections.

He said: "People's unhappiness over foreign workers, competition over jobs and widening income gaps, for instance, are much stronger factors in voting than any handout."

Deadline 2011

So when can we expect the election, which has to be held by 2011?

Mr Lee Yoong Yoong, 38, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, explained: "The Government is likely to seek a fresh mandate after it's taken Singapore out of the economic crisis - from red to blue - with a healthy growth forecast of up to 7 per cent this year."

He also said that while there may not have been immediate monetary incentives, the overall Budget benefits most Singaporeans.

"It benefits older Singaporeans, companies and even measures like raising the foreign worker levy could mean more jobs for Singaporeans in the future," he said.

Hence, as he summed up, it was a "very decent" Budget which benefits society - not all that dissimilar from previous budgets in election years.

But in former Nominated Member of Parliament Zulkifli Baharudin's view, Singaporeans should not read too much into this year's Budget.

"I don't think the Government is under any pressure to deliver a certain kind of Budget even if it were an election year. It's not about that," he said.

"This Government is more concerned with long-term sustainability. It would not risk doing something popular and running out of steam later."

He said it is "not a time for Singaporeans to be thinking only about goodies" as the economy has only just begun to emerge from a deep recession.

Economic recovery, he noted, should be the Government's focus.

So Budget 2010, all said and done, may well be just about the economy.