

How many opposition parties do you know?

Not many, says our survey. But young voters still want more opposition in Parliament

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The New Paper, 30 March 2011

Everyone has heard of the People's Action Party (PAP).

That's according to a survey of 1,003 Singaporeans aged 21 to 35 commissioned by The New Paper.

But it's a different story with the opposition parties.

More than 40 per cent had never heard of parties such as the National Solidarity Party (NSP), Singapore Justice Party (SJP) and Singapore Malay National Organisation (PKMS).

It gets even worse for newer parties.

About 50 per cent have never heard of the Reform Party (formed in 2008); the Socialist Front (formed last year) fared even worse, with only 42 per cent recognising it.

And from the survey results, it appears that, almost across the board, the older you are, the more aware you are of opposition parties.

For example, 85 per cent of the 31 to 35 age group have heard of the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA), compared to 84 per cent for those aged 26 to 30 and 79 per cent for those aged 21 to 25.

Voters aged 21 to 35 will account for about 600,000, or one in four, of the 2.35 million eligible voters this coming GE.

So why the lack of awareness among young voters? It's down to low interest in politics, said Singapore Management University Assistant Professor Eugene Tan.

"Many may not have voted before and so have not had to engage with and familiarise themselves with the political players."

He added that the high "never of heard" rate maybe down to some of the opposition parties being dormant in-between elections.

He said: "So it is no surprise if the people polled have not heard of some of them. (These parties) lack presence, profile and prominence such that voters may not even be aware of their existence.

"We have also a few new parties in the last two years such as the Socialist Front and Reform Party."

Given these parties' freshmen status, Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow with the Institute of Policy Studies, said: "It will take time to make themselves and what they stand for, known."

So that's with the opposition parties the young have not heard of.

But how do they feel about the ones they know?

Among opposition parties they have heard of, most young voters are predominantly neutral to them, with no views on whether they are credible or not credible.

The survey was conducted between December 2010 and January this year. And in that time, many opposition parties had been working to raise their profiles.

Most parties have also intensified outreach efforts online using social media.

First impressions important

But it hasn't all been good news for opposition parties.

The Reform Party grabbed the headlines when more than 20 members resigned last month, citing difficulties with Mr Kenneth Jeyaretnam, the party's secretary-general.

Earlier this month, Socialist Front leader Chia Ti Lik, a lawyer, was found guilty of professional misconduct over blog postings he wrote between 2008 and 2009, which breached ethical rules and were in contempt of court.

Said Dr Tan: "Yes, perceptions may have changed with the negative publicity, but I doubt it will be a sea-change.

"But first impressions are important and for young voters. If their first news of a party is negative, that will put it at a disadvantage."

He said that looking at the results, most of the opposition parties outside the Top 3 "should be concerned".

The better-known parties tend to be more personality-based, he said.

"It's the force of the personality and public persona of their leaders that help make their parties better known," he added.

For instance, the opposition party viewed as most credible and most well known, the Workers' Party, has Hougang MP Low Thia Kiang, and NCMP Sylvia Lim.

Singapore Democratic Party has Dr Chee Soon Juan, while Mr Chiam See Tong is chief of Singapore People's Party, and has for many years contested under the SDA banner before pulling his party out of the alliance earlier this year.

What do the experts think of the number of opposition parties now? In 2006, there were three opposition parties, while in 2001, there were four.

Dr Tan said at one level, it indicates a more fragmented opposition.

Has the increase in quantity led to an improvement in quality of candidates and political parties, he asked.

"Given the limited resources (funds, membership and political recognition) that small parties have, they may have limitations in terms of political outreach to voters. So the question is whether they should merge and pool their resources so that they can be more effective," Dr Tan said.

Despite meetings to sort out who contests where, opposition parties still haven't agreed on some wards, such as the new four-member GRC Moulmein-Kallang.

Said Dr Tan: "If more parties result in more intra-opposition competition, then that may detract from the overarching challenge of creating a viable alternative that can give the PAP a run for its money."

Dr Koh said it's good that the opposition party scene has become more lively, but only if it means more thoughtful and responsible people who care about the country and are willing to discuss with the public and the PAP their alternative views and solutions for the country.

But sociologist Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser said: "I don't think the 'sheer number' really matters. What matters for the opposition is that some parties are able to establish their credibility and their brand, and thereby pull ahead of the pack."

More opposition in Govt? Yes please

As a group, 77 per cent of those aged between 21 and 35 say there's a need for more opposition politicians in Government.

But it appears it's the older lot that make a louder argument.

Among those aged 31 to 35, 81 per cent feel a need for more opposition. It's down to 78 per cent among the 26-to-30 year olds, and 72 per cent among those 21 to 25.

There are now two opposition Members of Parliament - Mr Low Thia Kiang (Workers' Party, representing Hougang) and Mr Chiam See Tong (Singapore Democratic Alliance, Potong Pasir) - and one non-constituency MP, Ms Sylvia Lim (Workers' Party).

How many more opposition politicians would the young voters like to see?

More than two-thirds of the respondents said they would like 20 per cent of Parliament to be made up opposition politicians. That works out to at least 17 Opposition MPs, out of 87 seats in Parliament up for grabs at this election.

Even if they don't win any seats, the Opposition is guaranteed a minimum of nine seats in Parliament after this election.

That's because of the amended Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) Scheme mooted by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and passed by Parliament last April.

Under the scheme, if less than nine opposition politicians get elected, their ranks will be topped up to nine by allowing the best-performing losers to be admitted into Parliament as NCMPs.

Minimum standards

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan was surprised that the youngest respondents feel the least need for more opposition representation in Government, "given the conventional wisdom of young voters having more liberal tendencies and being less enamoured of the PAP".

He said: "It may suggest that the young voters are not going to support the proposition that Singapore needs more opposition merely for the sake of it."

"It may indicate that the young voters have certain minimum standards for the opposition.

"And if that standard is not met, then it maybe better not to have poor quality opposition. If so, then we do have discerning young voters."

While many young voters are unaware of opposition parties, they make a call for more opposition politicians in Government.

A contradiction?

Not so, said Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser of the Institute of Policy Studies. "One may want to get married, yet know- and need to know- only a handful of potential mates."