

Parties must be creative if GE is held amid virus outbreak: analysts

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A general election in the heat of the Covid-19 crisis will be very different from previous elections, political watchers said. With social distancing measures in place, for instance, political parties will have to be more creative and think of ways to campaign and engage the audience, they said.

According to the Singapore Constitution, the next general election (GE) must be held by April 2021.

There has been chatter about an impending GE over the last couple of months, at least, but it picked up pace last Friday when the new electoral boundaries were announced.

While the Government is obviously keeping its cards close to its chest, General Elections under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's watch has come between two to three months after the electoral boundaries report was released. But these are unusual times.

Political analyst and law professor at the Singapore Management University Eugene Tan told *The New Paper* it is important that all health and safety measures are in place at election rallies.

He said: "Enforcing social distancing at a rally can be a challenge. You can't force people to keep a safe proximity from one another even if a limit is placed on the number of participants."

Prof Tan also pointed out the difficulties of having an online rally.

He said: "There will certainly be a distancing effect... It will be like talking to a laptop. Even then, it will be like a one-way party broadcast instead of a rally."

Online rallies may also not appeal to senior citizens, who generally prefer face-to-face interactions.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director for research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said this may be the first GE where mass rallies may not be allowed due to the Covid-19 situation.

But she pointed out that conducting online rallies has its plus points.

She said: "In fact, there is so much that can be done creatively, and the reach may be even wider than the old-world ways of conducting hustings, that political parties in Singapore will wonder why they might want to do expensive real-world rallies ever again."

CONVENIENCE

While she acknowledged that the appeal of a physical rally may be lost, the convenience and "special effects" that come with having online rallies could be beneficial to politicians.

She said online platforms will also "level the playing field" for smaller opposition parties. Dr Koh pointed out that political parties would have to be aware of the rules surrounding campaigning if

they want to take it online, such as the Parliamentary Elections (Election Advertising) Regulations, and the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act.

Associate Professor Alan Chong at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies is wary of online rallies as there is a risk that videos could be manipulated to generate fake news.

He also felt that it would not be a good time to call for the elections now.

To remain consistent with the current public health messaging, the authorities should wait till the crisis abates, he said.