

GE likely to be held in July if Covid-19 situation improves: Analysts

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The next General Election (GE) is likely to happen in July, in line with the second phase of Singapore's re-opening strategy, several political analysts said on Thursday (May 28).

Such a timeline would allow campaigning and polling to occur well into the second phase, when more social activities are expected to resume as the country transitions gradually towards a new normal, they said.

The GE must be held before April 14 next year, which means that Parliament will have to be dissolved at the latest by January.

Law lecturer Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University said: "With more relaxation of measures in phase two, the GE would come across as not putting public health and safety at risk. An early- or mid-July GE is most likely."

Political scientist Woo Jun Jie said: "Holding elections during this possible window, not long after the stricter phase one rules are relaxed, would allow for some level of political campaigning that, of course, won't be massive and we probably will not see large-scale rallies like before."

The political analysts were responding to comments by Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat during an interview with CNA, which was published on Wednesday.

Mr Heng, who is also the first assistant secretary-general of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), said that the GE is "coming nearer by the day".

"The sooner we get it done, the earlier we can rally everybody together to deal with these very significant challenges ahead, and also to deal with these very significant uncertainties in the months and years ahead," Mr Heng, who is expected to become Singapore's next prime minister, said.

Following Mr Heng's remarks, most of the analysts who spoke to TODAY agreed that barring any worsening of the Covid-19 pandemic in Singapore, Polling Day is likely to happen in July.

Assoc Prof Tan said: "This would be in phase two of the transition out of the circuit breaker. This strikes me as the most likely window for the GE."

Phase one, which starts on June 2, is expected to last around a month at the minimum — or two incubation cycles of Sars-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes Covid-19.

Phase two, which will see most social activities resume and all students returning to schools, is therefore expected to begin earliest on July 2. National Development Minister Lawrence Wong said on Thursday that this could happen slightly earlier, before the end of June, if the infection numbers are low and stable particularly in the first two weeks of June.

Mr Wong, who co-chairs a governmental task force looking into Singapore's response to Covid-19, said that Singapore is on track to enter the second phase earlier than prescribed if

the trend continues to be positive. There were no infections among Singaporeans and permanent residents on Thursday.

Dr Felix Tan, an associate lecturer at SIM Global Education, predicted that Parliament could be dissolved after its next sitting. On June 4, Members of Parliament are slated to debate the Fortitude Budget, the third supplement of the national budget, that was announced earlier this week.

“If Parliament is dissolved within that period, it could take about two weeks to Nomination Day and a week or two for campaigning. If that is the case, Polling Day could be in the middle of July,” Dr Tan said.

Under election rules, a GE must be held within three months after the dissolution of Parliament. When a writ of election is issued on the same day, Nomination Day has to be held between five days and a month, after which Polling Day will have to be set between 10 and 56 days later.

A GE is typically held 17 days after Parliament is dissolved, though the analysts said that this pandemic might shake things up. Under the Constitution and the Parliamentary Elections Act, the writ of election can be issued as late as two months after the dissolution of Parliament.

Some added that there is a good chance that the election may occur possibly during the school break in July, when most school facilities are available to be used as polling stations.

The Ministry of Education had moved the June school holidays forward to May 5, and added a one-week mid-term break from July 20 to 26.

Holding a GE then would also allow time for normalcy to set in during the more relaxed measures of the second phase, the analysts said.

COULD IT BE EARLIER THAN JULY?

Giving another view on this, Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said that much depends on the Covid-19 situation among the community as well.

“Under normal circumstances, most will look for when there are long school holidays so that there is enough time to prepare polling stations, most of which are within school buildings. But these are not normal times.

“When there is a consistent pattern of single-digit or zero infections within the community, it makes it far more tenable to contemplate going to the polls,” she said.

Having a sustained period of low or zero transmission would mean that PAP can justify holding an election at an earlier time, she added.

Political scientist Walid Jumblatt Abdullah from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) said that if PAP wanted to hold the GE as soon as possible, it could occur as early as end-June during the first phase of the economy’s re-opening. However, he stressed that this was unlikely.

An election held this early could be perceived negatively by the public, “since there has been much outcry over whether it is proper to hold an election when strict distancing measures are in effect”.

Dr Walid, who is with NTU's Public Policy and Global Affairs programme, pointed out that more livelihoods would be hit adversely by the pandemic, so the PAP Government may decide to call elections earlier.

He also noted that Mr Heng had referred to South Korea's elections in the CNA interview. The country had gone to the polls in April while serious Covid-19 precautions were in force, and had recorded the highest voter turnout in 28 years.

ANOTHER OUTBREAK COULD SET DATE BACK

On Thursday, Mr Wong warned about how a large Covid-19 cluster in early June could push phase two to begin only in mid-July, later than expected.

Dr Woo, who spoke about the possibility of a new outbreak or a climb in the number of community infections, said that this could lead to the Government choosing to hold off the elections further, extending until the August or September period.

Dr Koh of IPS said that holding the GE after Singapore's National Day in August could be a chance for the PAP Government to set out the country's achievements — through a platform such as the National Day Rally — and lay out a narrative on how people have coped during the pandemic.

“But after August, it does not look like the GE will be something held at the end of the year, save for the chance that there are still a lot of Covid-19 cases in Singapore, which is always a possibility,” Dr Koh added.

She also noted that beyond Covid-19, the global geopolitical situation is becoming increasingly fraught with tensions rising between the United States and China once again, giving rise to greater uncertainty.

“For Singapore, we would want to choose a window where there is less, rather than more uncertainty, which will heat up as we approach the US presidential election in November. We are already seeing these tensions now.”

GREATER CLARITY NEEDED

On Thursday, several opposition parties spoke out about the prospects of an imminent GE.

The Workers' Party, for example, called for the PAP Government to clarify campaigning rules during this crisis, stating that there is a “distinct lack of clarity as to precisely how campaigning will be modified”.

The Singapore Democratic Party called for the usual nine days of campaigning to be extended to 21 to allow for more “equitable access” to voters.

The political analysts interviewed said that it was clear the coming GE will likely feature online campaigning over physical rallies. However, beyond that, there is not much clarity on how campaigning can be conducted while safe distancing measures are in effect.

Rules, such as those that govern political advertising on television or on social media, should be spelt out clearly and should also allow more latitude for various parties to campaign, they added.

Dr Woo said: "Clarified campaigning rules will ultimately be a good thing from the public health standpoint."