

Some opposition chiefs say new GE rules ‘level the playing field’, others rue absence of crowd-pulling rallies

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The election campaign guidelines released by the Elections Department (ELD) on Thursday (June 18) present a “significant improvement” from previous elections, said some opposition party leaders, while others lamented that the inability to hold physical rallies would hamper their outreach efforts.

The new rules governing campaigning activities mean that the next General Election (GE) would be a largely virtual one, if GE were to be held during Phase Two of Singapore’s exit from its circuit breaker.

With large-scale physical rallies banned, and walkabouts and house visits limited to no more than groups of five in accordance with Phase Two restrictions, political parties have to rely on their online channels by conducting webinars and live-streaming sessions.

Among other things, political parties will get more airtime on national television through a new category of national broadcasts called the “constituency political broadcasts”, where every candidate will get an average of three minutes to deliver his or her message.

People’s Power Party (PPP) chief Goh Meng Seng and his People’s Voice counterpart Lim Tean said that this allows voters to know each candidate better, and to scrutinise them based on their merits. Voters will also be less distracted by the emotional rhetoric often heard during election rallies.

Mr Goh said that the new guidelines are not disadvantageous to PPP candidates.

“It reduces the effect of having a good party brand and falls heavily on each candidate’s ability to convince voters to vote for them,” he said.

Mr Jose Raymond, chairman of the Singapore People’s Party, said that the new guidelines affect all candidates from all political parties, including the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP), as they now have to build a comprehensive outreach and communications strategy, both online and offline.

“In a way, this does level the playing field and can also save some parties from expending unnecessary financial resources, especially if their rallies were sparsely attended,” he said.

BAN ON PHYSICAL RALLIES

However, other political parties feel that the banning of physical rallies, while understandable in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, strips away their ability to engage more effectively with voters.

The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) said the move only benefits the ruling party as the Opposition will not be able to hold traditional rallies which are crucial for them to communicate directly with voters.

Restricting physical outreach to groups of no more than five people also hampers effective outreach and communication, the party said.

“Such restrictions could have been further relaxed if the PAP waits for a couple more months and holds the elections in Phase Three when the risk of new infections is minimal. This would allow parties to campaign freely and effectively,” said an SDP spokesperson.

The secretary-general of the Democratic Progressive Party, Mr Mohamad Hamim Aliyas, said that the reliance on live-streaming limits the party’s access to older voters who may not be as digitally savvy.

“Not everyone might want to watch a constituency political broadcast that is not relevant to them,” he said.

In addition, with 93 seats up for grabs based on the most recent electoral boundaries, Mr Hamim questioned how the time slots will be allotted as every party will vie for the prime time belts of between 8pm and 10pm.

Mr Andy Zhu, chairman of the Reform Party, said that three minutes given for each candidate in the constituency political broadcast are not sufficient.

“It is more favourable to the ruling party as we already have minimum exposure to the public,” he added.

While supportive of the new guidelines, PPP’s Mr Goh pointed out that one disadvantage is the lack of opportunities to raise funds for the party, which typically takes place during physical rallies.

In a media statement, Red Dot United, which just received its approval to be registered as a political party on Monday, said that the constituency political broadcasts should be offered on the different language channels, instead of just Channel 5, which is Mediacorp’s English-language channel.

The Workers’ Party, the only opposition party with elected Members of Parliament, said it is currently studying the new campaigning guidelines.

A PAP spokesperson also said that it is studying the details of the new guidelines closely.

“We will adhere to the prevailing guidelines as laid out by the multi-ministry taskforce for any activities involving public interaction, in accordance to whichever phase of the post-circuit breaker measures that the next elections may be held in,” added the spokesperson.

HOW POLITICIANS CAN ADAPT

With political parties losing their go-to avenue of campaigning through physical rallies, political analysts said the next GE requires candidates to really hone in on their messaging.

With both national TV airtime and online streaming at their disposal, parties need to customise their message to the voter demographic best reached by the various platforms, the analysts added.

So, a live-streaming campaign should cater to the younger voters while a TV broadcast should be aimed at reaching out to the older ones, said political analyst Woo Jun Jie.

“What ultimately makes a campaign successful... is how authentic your message is,” said Associate Professor Eugene Tan, a law professor at the Singapore Management University.

Unlike physical rallies where a carnival-like atmosphere and having political heavyweights speaking at the end could hold the attention of the voters, all these would be lost in the national broadcasts and online streaming sessions, said analysts.

“Now at the click of my mouse, I can move to other rallies. Political parties need to think of not just how to draw, but how to retain those eyeballs. They need to have content that is attractive,” said Assoc Prof Tan.

He added that political parties have to be very creative in coming up with content, especially online, to hold the viewer’s attention.

“No one is going to listen to an online rally if it is just one speaker coming up one after another (like in physical rallies),” he said.

Analysts TODAY spoke to agreed that the online campaigning will be able to slightly level the playing field between the PAP and the other opposition parties.

Dr Gillian Koh, the deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, believes that smaller parties with less resources will benefit as it is typically the larger outfits that could afford to organise mass rallies.

“With online media, parties do not need to pay for use of stadiums, rent tentage, stages, pay for lights, security and so on. Parties can also engage audiences all day, every day...” she said.

“The engagement doesn’t have to be confined to a physical space and draw audiences only from certain constituencies.”