

WHY A SEPTEMBER POLL MAY BE TOO EARLY FOR VOTERS

Issues, candidates matter more than strategic timing advantage

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Last Friday's release of the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee's (EBRC) report has generated intense speculation as to when Parliament will be dissolved and the Writ of Election issued.

The report, which took about two months to prepare, came 11 days after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced in Parliament that he had convened the EBRC in May. Its publication was without undue delay — it was submitted to PM Lee on July 21 and published on July 24.

Predictably, the EBRC duly delivered on its terms of reference by reducing the average size of Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) from five to 4.75, and adding an additional single-member constituency (SMC) and one GRC. In total, 89 seats will be up for contest in the next General Election (GE).

However, the EBRC did not elaborate in sufficient detail about how the boundaries had been redrawn beyond the generic explanation of population shifts and housing development since the last boundary delineation exercise in February 2011. This was a wasted opportunity and will only result in accusations of gerrymandering, even though changes in the EBRC report were not drastic.

There was no return of the three-member GRCs, which featured only in the 1988 GE when the GRC scheme was first introduced. Surprisingly, the EBRC recommended retaining the two six-member GRCs, currently helmed by PM Lee (Ang Mo Kio GRC) and Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean (Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC).

Will we see new or never-elected candidates being heavily stacked in these two mega GRCs to ride on the personal popularity of the Prime Minister and Mr Teo?

In the past, a GE was called anywhere from a day to eight weeks from the EBRC report's publication. In Parliament earlier this month, PM Lee gave the assurance that "to the maximum extent possible, we (the Govern-



PM Lee and members of Ang Mo Kio GRC thanking residents after the General Election in 2011. The EBRC has recommended retaining Ang Mo Kio and Pasir Ris-Punggol GRCs, which have six members each. TODAY FILE PHOTO

ment) will make sure there is enough time elapsed so that everybody can read the report, understand it, and know where they stand before elections are called".

However, the speed at which the EBRC report was issued — two months after its formation compared with four months in 2006 and 2011 — has raised speculation that the GE would be called sooner instead of later.

Observers believe the first probable window for the GE is during the school holidays from Sept 5 to 12. However, is six weeks sufficient time for the various political parties and Singaporeans to come to grips with the new electoral boundaries, and to know the various party platforms and candidates?

More time is certainly desirable. If Sept 12 is when Singaporeans go to the polls to elect the 13th cohort of Members of Parliament, Parliament will have to be dissolved on Aug 26. This may be just days after the National Day Rally, which is traditionally held about two weeks after Aug 9. A Sept 5 poll may mean Parliament being dis-

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solved before the expected rally date.

FEEL-GOOD EFFECTS FROM DIVIDENDS

A GE in September will create a dramatic change to the national mood in a matter of weeks. From the high of Singapore's 50th birthday celebrations with a strong sense of togetherness, Singaporeans will then encounter the intensity of feelings and perhaps even some divisions that often accompany a GE.

Given what is at stake in the coming GE, we can expect a roller-coaster ride during the hustings.

A year-end GE will take away the likelihood of voters feeling a sense of unfairness. Opposition parties will have more than four months to walk the ground — the longest interval in our political history. With the People's Action Party (PAP) unveiling about 20 to 25 new candidates, that also gives voters the time to get to know them and the opposition line-ups.

A September election has been

much bandied about because of the supposed strategic advantage it gives the PAP. In essence, it's about Singaporeans being in a positive mood with the climax of the SG50 celebrations.

Then there is the supposed "LKY dividend" that should be banked in during Mr Lee Kuan Yew's birthday month. Delaying the GE, it is argued, may see the feel-good effect dissipate and uncertainties that may tip the national mood presenting themselves.

I am not sanguine that these considerations are pertinent. First, Singaporeans have come to better differentiate party, government, and state. Yes, the PAP government has led Singapore since 1959 when she attained self-government.

However, affection for the country and pride in her reaching a significant milestone in her history are not necessarily going to result in votes for the PAP. After all, Singapore's success today is not just the mere outcome of the PAP's important leadership.

To that, there is the Civil Service and every Singaporean, past and present, who has contributed in his or her own way. Should the PAP play up SG50 celebrations in its campaign, that may well leave a bitter aftertaste that the national celebrations were but trumped-up advanced electioneering.

The massive unprecedented outpouring of grief for founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew will also not necessarily lead to voters casting ballots for the ruling party without thinking. With his death, Mr Lee has risen above partisan politics. He no longer belongs exclusively to the PAP — a party he co-founded in 1955 and led as secretary-general to 1992.

The late Mr Lee is now a national hero — he belongs to every Singaporean. As such, any blatant attempt to exclusively claim Mr Lee for the PAP's sole benefit will probably provoke a backlash at the ballot boxes, if not earlier. However, an "LKY dividend" may only be in his Tanjong Pagar ward, which he represented between April 1955 and March this year.

It is true that we should not fixate on when the GE will be held. National issues and the candidates who will form the core of Singapore's fourth-generation leadership deserve more attention at this stage.

However, if September polls are called, there would be little time to understand and think about them. We are already on the cusp of the climax of the SG50 celebrations. Time is of the essence, but it must be about Singapore and Singaporeans, not about seizing strategic advantage for partisan benefit.