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### Shaping up for a landmark election

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# Shaping up for a landmark election

The stage is set for a robust contest, where hopefully integrity and voter due diligence will prevail



EUGENE K B TAN

The next two-and-a-half weeks will keep Singaporeans enthralled now that the date for 11th General Election has been fixed for May 7. Unlike previous elections, Singaporeans can expect a majority of, if not all, seats to be contested.

The Opposition has promised a better-quality slate of candidates to help break the one-party dominance of Parliament. The People's Action Party (PAP) has staked Singapore's and its future on its fourth-generation leadership renewal. It has also insisted that the institutional design of our political system must produce a government with a clear mandate, demonstrated through a strong parliamentary majority, for it to be able to govern resolutely and decisively in the long-term interests of Singapore.

Against a backdrop of a growing income gap, inflation concerns

and increased costs of living, the campaigning has already started, albeit unofficially.

It will pick up pace significantly after Nomination Day – next Wednesday – when we will see political parties and the candidates engaging in close-quarters electioneering.

Singaporeans will be inundated with various political messages and appeals, and there will also be a certain air of festivity to the hustings. Politics will dominate most discussions and the consciousness of Singaporeans.

The nine days of campaigning – the minimum required by law – promises to be intensive, pulsating and engaging. With new media platforms and mainstream media seeking to keep pace, Singaporeans will have no shortage of news and analysis. Making sense of the diverse voices and appeals will be the key responsibility of each and every voter.

What are some of the significant developments that we should hope to see in this GE?

First, I hope the PAP will be bold and slay its sacred cows of not fielding women or minority candidates in the Single-Member Constituencies (SMCs). The last time the PAP fielded a woman candidate and a minority candidate in single seats was in 1991 and 1988 respectively. It appears to consider fielding a minority-race woman in an SMC the least competitive electoral strategy.

Race and gender should not matter in how voters make their choice – if they did, it would point to the poverty of our multiracialism and meritocracy – and on this score, the PAP can take the lead in dispelling prejudices rather than reinforce stereotypes. As it is, this GE should see several PAP teams for GRCs being helmed by a minority-race minister, while it is likely to field Ms Grace Fu and Dr Amy Khor in Yuhua and Hong Kah North SMCs.

#### DECORUM AND SCRUTINY

Second, we should maintain a high level of respect and decorum in

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the hustings. By all means, all parties should campaign vigorously and make their policy platforms known. But we must not descend into character assassination, mud-slinging, falsehoods and scare tactics. As it is, there have been invasive intrusions into the personal lives of candidates.

To be sure, any candidate seeking to be elected into Parliament should expect to be carefully scrutinised by the electorate – it is about due diligence on the part of voters. But political parties, whatever their persuasion, and their supporters need to maintain the integrity of the electoral process. The GE is a battle for votes, but let's not make the process an ugly and farcical one. Ultimately, we are all rooting for Singapore.

Third, the GE must be treated as a means to build a consensus on the type of parliamentary democracy that is best for Singapore, as much as it is an end, that of electing the MPs and forming the government.

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But voters will also have to assess which political party will promote both their interests as well as the common good. It may well be that one's self-interest will not only compete but also conflict with the common good. If so, each voter will have to decide – which should take priority?

#### A WATERSHED?

Come Polling Day, Singaporeans will wait with bated breath for the results. Barring a dramatic reversal of fortune the PAP will form the Government, continuing an unbroken run dating back to 1959. But will its political hegemony be threatened?

It may well be that the PAP could win as many as 86 out of 87 seats but with a smaller overall vote share. Under our "first past the post" electoral system, whether a political party wins a seat by a single ballot or 99.9 per cent of the votes, the winner takes it all.

Or, the Opposition might wrestle a GRC or two from the PAP. If they succeed, then the GRC is no longer the impregnable fortress for the PAP.

Would it mark the beginning of a viable two-party system in Singapore's democratic development?

The stage is set for this GE to be contested robustly. As we mature as a society, our political landscape will inevitably be more diverse and competitive. This is when the "how" questions become more important. How do we ensure that our political system remains inclusive and representative in tandem with growing democratic aspirations – while increasing Singaporeans' civic participation and ownership of governmental processes?

For now, Singaporeans look forward eagerly to exercising their most powerful right as a citizen on May 7, at the ballot box. ■

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