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### Formal alliance not the panacea

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# Formal alliance not the panacea

Opposition still needs to manage the egos of key players and keep distrust between parties at bay

EUGENE K BTAN

Mini-election fever is palpable. Although the next General Election can be called as late as February 2012, it is evident that the Opposition and some segments of the electorate have begun to look at national and local issues through an "election prism".

Likewise, Opposition unity – a topic that surfaces every five years or so – is once again being talked about. Widely seen as necessary to counter the political dominance of the ruling party, Opposition unity, as the argument goes, is crucial to the pooling of limited resources.

More than that, the signalling effect of a united Opposition could help their cause.

This countervailing effort and its cascading effect can perhaps do more to inspire confidence than any political manifesto.

It can add much-needed credence to the Opposition's desire to grow eventually into a government-in-waiting.

The most visible, if ambivalent, indicator of collaboration remains the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA), even though it currently only comprises the Singapore People's Party, Singapore Malay National Organisation and Singapore Justice Party.

There are, in fact, more parties that are not part of the SDA: The National Solidarity Party, Reform Party, Singapore Democratic Party, newly-registered United Singapore Democrats and Workers' Party.

Despite having to compete against the People's Action Party's (PAP) electoral machine, the Opposition has been unable to work closely with one another. This undermines the Opposition collectively.

The challenge of scaling up Opposition unity is formidable. To be sure, a larger or more formal Opposition alliance is not the panacea. Substance matters more than form.

Unity is more than just the imperative to avoid three-cornered electoral fights. It has to embrace a sharing of electoral plans, strategies and candidates, and perhaps even a common manifesto on key issues.

The joint walkabout last Sunday by SDA's veteran MP Chiam See Tong and Reform Party's Kenneth Jeyaretnam in Bishan-Toa Payoh suggests that a new political collaboration may well be on the cards.

To be sustainable, the Opposition has to look beyond narrow party interests and pride in the give-and-take that is needed.

With 12 Single-Member Constituencies (SMCs) up for grabs, the bartering will be intense and competitive since the stronger and better-known Opposition candidates are likely to want to contest in the SMCs.

Second, there is a need to rise above parochial party affiliations to put together



Mr Chiam See Tong (standing, second from left) with his wife and SDA members speaking to residents in Bishan-Toa Payoh last week. WEE TECK HIAN

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the best slate of candidates in the Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs).  
 The SDA and Reform Party, if an alliance

is eventually struck, may take that important first step towards the pooling of candidates, resources and local knowledge.

A combined slate will also enable the Opposition not to be hemmed in by the limitations of each party, and to instead leverage on their collective strengths.

However, there is still the challenge of managing egos of key personalities and keeping distrust at bay within the Opposition camp.

It may be time to drop formal alliances and opt for a less hierarchical structure that will facilitate collaboration among parties.

Of fundamental importance is the necessity of the Opposition imbibing shared core values, with agreement on the ground rules and norms. Critically, there must be shared values to discipline the new-found shared purpose if the collaboration is to be meaningful, impactful and sustainable.

A unified Opposition approach may one day enable them to contest every constituency. The fewer walkovers the Opposition concedes on Nomination Day, the

less likely it will be that the PAP "big guns" in uncontested wards can campaign in the contested ones.

But to do this, there needs to be a significant level of compromise within the Opposition to ensure there are contests even in the traditionally strong PAP seats where success is hard to come by.

What will all this mean to the voters? For one, voters will be offered, one hopes, real choices – assuming the Opposition fields serious candidates.

Voters will also get to vote, and exercise their democratic responsibility and discernment for the greater good.

Political competition will also encourage Singaporeans to pay attention to both municipal and national issues so that they can make informed decisions on the political trajectory of the country.

All said, the country stands to benefit. ■

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