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Citation

EUGENE, Tan K. B.. Early polls make sense in a worsening pandemic. (2020). *Straits Times*. A17-A17.
Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol_research/3820

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Early polls make sense in a worsening pandemic

There is no good time to hold an election in a pandemic – so it's important to find a window of opportunity to do so. The timeline is shorter than people think.

Eugene K.B. Tan

For The Straits Times

There is no good time for a general election amid the global pandemic. It is a judgment call on when to hold Singapore's 13th general election, which must take place by April next year at the latest.

Many scientists think the pandemic will rage on for at least a year, and economists predict a global recession as a result.

In fact, instead of April 2021 as the latest date, the election timeline is even shorter. Jan 14, 2021 is the correct reference point – it is when Parliament's five-year term ends.

The election has to be held within three months of that date.

But once Parliament's term lapses, there is a legislative limbo: Should there be a need for urgent drastic measures, no legislative mechanism is in place to sanction it.

For example, it would not be possible to enact laws to provide for the delay in the conduct of a general election beyond April next year, even if that is warranted. Our Constitution also does not provide for a caretaker government.

The pandemic is rapidly evolving. No one can say for certain when it will be over, and whether the current situation in Singapore, which is now under control with no widespread community spread, will persist.

With the clock ticking down, it is prudent to plan for the scenario that things will get worse before they get better. Not to acknowledge the virus' reach is a deadly mistake.

In other words, where there is no good time for a general election, the imperative is to identify a window of opportunity to hold one.

An election now is not premature at all, as Parliament has about nine months of its term left.

If things do not improve, holding the election later will pose an even greater threat to public health.

Proponents for a later election assume that normalcy will return sooner rather than later. But to merely assume that things will get better is not a calculated risk but rather an unmitigated gamble.

The outbreak in Singapore is under control for now. Although there has been a spike in cases in the past week, most of the recent cases are imported ones. But we cannot be sure that the situation will not deteriorate in the months ahead.

It would be impossible to hold an election if there is widespread community infection and a large segment of the population is unwell or even critically ill.

If we proceed with a general election in the next one to three months, assuming the current

trajectory of infection spread, the Government will have to ensure that even as candidates campaign, there is no let-up in the fight against the outbreak.

Some people fear that early polls would distract the Government from the virus-fighting effort. But it would be a mistake to assume that the effort would be weakened because ministers Gan Kim Yong and Lawrence Wong, as co-chairs of the multi-ministry task force to tackle the Covid-19 outbreak, are running in the election.

Singapore has done well so far not because of two individuals, however crucial their roles, but because of the well-trained and dedicated people, robust processes and stringent protocols to deal with such situations since the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak.

Another criticism is that an election now poses severe public health risks. But even if it is held next year, the same health risks are likely to be present, if not more severe. As long as other countries are battling the virus, the threat of re-infection persists even for countries that may

have controlled it. This means similar precautions have to be taken for the election, regardless of when it is held.

For example, physical distancing measures will have to remain in place during campaigning and voting. Yes, it will be a qualitatively different election, but these are unprecedented times.

All political parties will be subject to the same physical distancing and other campaign rules. As the upcoming election will see more online electioneering, the opposition can compete there on an equal footing with the incumbent party in engaging voters directly.

Notably, the Workers' Party (WP) – arguably the most affected by the latest redrawing of electoral boundaries – did not cry foul over possible early polls. (Three of the single-member seats – Fengshan, Punggol East and Sengkang West – that the WP contested and performed well in, in 2015, have been absorbed into the East Coast and Sengkang GRCs.)

The WP urged the Government to make sure its decision on calling an election is made "in the best interests of Singapore, our democracy and the public health of Singaporeans".

There might even be an advantage in holding an election amid such a crisis, in focusing voters' minds on existential challenges and spurring political parties to articulate and be assessed on issues of security and economic survival: Will they support more severe public health measures, and what will they do to revive the confidence-shaken economy? What would be in the best

interests of Singapore?

From a constitutional and governance perspective, it would be better for Singapore to have a government with a five-year mandate as soon as possible, so that it can act resolutely and promptly to ensure the country comes out stronger from the pandemic.

Singapore's response to the pandemic is shaping and defining our society. Deft management of the crisis requires a good leadership team. The electoral process enables Singaporeans to choose their elected representatives and confer on them the authority and legitimacy to make difficult decisions and rally the people.

The confused responses to the virus in other countries, including mature democracies, are a solemn reminder that how a society responds to the pandemic intimately determines the outcomes – life and death, and the well-being and confidence of a society.

The bottom line is that Singapore's public health concerns are not at odds with its democratic health: The two go hand in hand.

It is a measure of a democracy's strength when a society can organise and hold elections to let people exercise their vote even in a public health emergency, in a way that protects their health and safeguards democracy.

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