SINGAPORE: All eyes are on whether the People's Action Party (PAP) will return to power on Nomination Day on Thursday.

Unlike the last election in 2001 where 55 PAP MPs from 10 GRCs were returned unopposed, this time, the opposition has indicated it may contest more than half of the 84 seats in parliament.

While there will be walkovers, 47 seats could be contested, pitting at least 10 of the PAP's new candidates against the opposition.

With 24 new candidates and a manifesto focused on creating opportunities for all Singaporeans, the PAP is all set for the electoral battle.

Its message to voters is that this election is about the big issues and Singapore's future in the next 10 to 15 years.

It is also Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's first election since assuming office about 20 months ago.

And he is confident of PAP's chances, especially with the good economic outlook translating into more jobs and a government package to help those affected by globalisation.

"We need a capable government to be on top of all these issues, to look over the horizon, to respond faster than other countries, to mobilise Singaporeans so that we can work together and be something special, not just three and a half million people but one very shining red dot," said PM Lee Hsien Loong.

In the run-up to Nomination Day, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew also highlighted the quality of the opposition in Singapore.

He said when groups like the Singapore Democratic Party choose to play "third world politics" - like publishing defamatory allegations about the NKF saga - the opposition will destroy itself.

"We want to have a First World parliament for Singapore, so we need to have a First World government and a First World opposition. If you want us to treat you as gentlemen, argue on the merits of your policy and our policy. Take it to a higher level and we will treat you accordingly and respond accordingly," said MM Lee.

On Nomination Day, the PAP's opposition will be revealed.

Candidates have just one hour - between 11am and noon - to present their nomination papers, and they must be accompanied by their proposers, seconders and assentors. By mid-day, it will be clear who is contesting where.

Observers say some 37 PAP candidates from 7 GRCs may return unopposed.

These include GRCs helmed by PAP heavyweights Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong.

GRCs unlikely to be contested are Bishan-Toa Payoh, Holland-Bukit Timah, Hong Kah, Jurong, Marine Parade, Tanjong Pagar and West Coast.

This will mean that new candidates like Christopher de Souza, Liang Eng Hwa, Hri Kumar and Josephine Teo will soon begin their first terms as MPs in Singapore's 11th Parliament.
For the first time since 1988, the opposition is aiming to contest more than half the 84 seats in parliament.

In the past 3 elections, the opposition has adopted a by-election strategy but failed to improve on its share of valid votes.

Once again, the opposition will contest all 9 single seats and some may even see a three-cornered fight.

Single seats have long been the preferred battleground for the opposition which is defending Potong Pasir and Hougang.

The opposition is also planning to contest 7 GRCs comprising a total of 38 seats.

This up from the 20 seats in 4 GRCs they contested in the 2001 election.

The Workers' Party (WP) is fielding 20 candidates in 4 single seats - Hougang, Joo Chiat, Nee Soon East and Nee Soon Central - and 3 GRCs - East Coast, Aljunied and the Prime Minister's constituency of Ang Mo Kio.

"I am going to tell you the heart of the WP election campaign today. They are accountability, hope for the future and First World government," said Low Thia Khiang, Secretary-General of Workers' Party.

The Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) is also fielding 20 candidates.

They are likely to stand in 4 single seats - Potong Pasir, Yio Chu Kang, Choa Chu Kang and MacPherson - and 3 GRCs - Tampines, Jalan Besar and Pasir Ris-Punggol.

"We don't want a parliamentary sitting to be a PAP party sitting. What we want is to hear alternative points of view," said SDA's chairman Chiam See Tong.

Meanwhile, the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) is eyeing the Bukit Panjang single seat and Sembawang GRC.

The party has not formally introduced its candidates, and its leaders face legal action by the Prime Minister and Minister Mentor over allegedly defamatory articles in its newsletter.

Observers say, compared to the 2001 election, the opposition had more lead-up time to prepare for the polls and there were few changes to the electoral boundaries.

But will the SDP's legal troubles tarnish the opposition as a whole?

"There will certainly be some segments of the electorate who will view what the SDP has done as being typical of the opposition. But I think that generally, other voters can differentiate between the different parties and see what each party has to offer," said Assistant Professor Eugene Tan of Singapore Management University.

But judging from previous nomination days, there could still be a surprise or two from the opposition.

- CNA/Is