PAP, opposition parties wooing the hearts of young voters

By Imelda Saad | Posted: 10 November 2010 1814 hrs

SINGAPORE: About one-third of the more than 2.3 million people on Singapore’s register of electors are under the age of 35 and some one hundred thousand of them are first time voters.

This will make up about 5 per cent of the total electorate for the next General Election due by February 2012.

Observers said they are a group difficult to please, with very diverse needs and aspirations. This is especially so for a group well-connected to the online world and is thus more exposed to global influences.

Zaqy Mohamad, the Vice-Chairman of Young PAP and an MP for Hong Kah GRC feels that younger voters will have an increasing influence in elections and how Singapore develops.

"I think increasingly, you find that they will have greater say in terms of what they wish and what they aspire for Singapore especially when more and more of them start coming online and becoming eligible at 21," he said.

Political parties have acknowledged that votes from young voters will make a difference.

A post 2006 election survey by the Institute of Policy Studies showed that about half of those under 35 are categorised as swing-voters - those who can be persuaded by either the opposition or ruling party. About a third, are "pluralists" - those who clamour for more voices in Parliament.

21-year-old first time voter, Soh Yi Da, is looking forward to the upcoming elections and wants to see a "contest of ideas" between the different parties.

"We want to see contest of ideas. We want to see more platforms where political parties are able to engage one another...I think majority of young people are all fence sitters I think we will wait until the last moment before making the decision.

"We want to hear the views from all the parties so whichever party that is credible, that have the best ideas show us through the contest of ideas that's able to win the peoples hearts and minds, who are truly sincere and passionate, who are genuine in their interaction will definitely still emerge as the victor."

This is something newer political parties on the scene, like the Reform Party (RP), are banking on.

"We've got the Reform Party page on Facebook, we got our Voting RP blog, we've got the
candidates personal pages and recently we've set up the GRC or constituency pages that we intend to contest as a means to allow residents to post directly about issues and for us to inform people living in those areas about our outreach programme," said Reform Party Secretary-General Kenneth Jeyaratnam.

He added that about 40 per cent of Reform Party members are under the age of 30.

The more established opposition parties, like the Workers' Party for example, are also wooing the young.

While the Workers' Party would not reveal the membership numbers for its Youth Wing, they said that "growth was promising" especially after the last elections.

Koh Choong Yong, President of the Workers' Party Youth Wing, said: "We have set up a Youth Wing since 2005 and from then till now, these 5 years we have a lot of outreach with young people and we also understand that some young people are interested in policy matters, some young people are interested in social kind of interaction. So the youth wing has embarked in two different kinds of activities."

Mr Koh said outreach events include dialogues, forums and social activities.

Observers said the challenge would be how parties pitch their message to different groups.

Eugene Tan, Assistant Professor with the School of Law at Singapore Management University, said that it was crucial for political parties to not just focus on young voters.

"So for any party campaigning they can't just focus on the young voters so the challenge is to calibrate the message that fits each vote bank but at the same time ensuring that there are no inherent contradictions and that it fits into the larger party message.

"It's a diverse group so certainly there will be some young voters who are concerned with material aspirations, housing prices, car prices, but I think there will also be young voters who will be concerned with what I call post material aspirations so things like freedom of speech, quality of life in Singapore, do we want the society to be a rat race, what is it that makes up the national identity.

"It is that diverse groups with very different hopes, aspirations, expectations and fears as well. So it is a very challenging group, compared to the other vote banks like women and retirees," he said.

Mr Zaqy said that it all boils down to how candidates communicate with the electorate to win their hearts and minds.

"I think many of our young are also better educated, better exposed and I think over time they are also able to judge for themselves one's track record, one's credibility as well as what they wish to see implemented and executed.

"I think at the end of the day, what we need to do as candidates is to convince them on the
approach and why this is the best approach forward and of course there are certain pitfalls there are always certain implications but it's about communication and explaining and being sincere on what you promised."

Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong has also described the next election as a watershed event for young Singaporeans - even those not old enough to vote. That is because Singapore's fourth prime minister and a core team of younger ministers is expected to emerge at the next general election.

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