Youngest PAP candidate takes online criticism in her stride

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SINGAPORE — The online vitriol has come thick and fast for some new People's Action Party (PAP) candidates, including its youngest candidate in three decades, Ms Tin Pei Ling (picture).

Ms Tin, 27, told MediaCorp that she is taking it in her stride: “It’s really about people and residents. I’ll focus my energy working the ground and learning from seniors like Mr Matthias Yao, to see how I can help residents.”

And while Ms Tin has no intention of throwing the book at her detractors, a check by MediaCorp showed that under the amended Parliamentary Elections Act — which only comes into effect during the period of a General Election — candidates can raise concerns with the Elections Department on comments made before or after the elections.

Changes to the Act in March include a new penalty of a fine or jail term of up to 12 months, or both, for anyone who publishes false statements about the personal character or conduct of a candidate “for the purpose of affecting the return of any candidate”.

Still, former Nominated Member of Parliament Siew Kum Hong — a corporate counsel — noted that any enforcement actions would deviate from the Government’s light touch policy on Internet regulation.

Mr Siew pointed out that “some degree of attacks and criticisms online is to be expected and can never be eliminated”.

“The proper approach would be to announce any change in policy in advance, and then take enforcement action against conduct subsequent to the announcement, so that netizens would not be caught by surprise,” he added.

PAP MP Zaqy Mohamad, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for the Ministry of Information Communication and the Arts, reiterated that the Government takes a “light touch approach” unless the attacks are persistent and defamatory.

Singapore Management University (SMU) law lecturer Eugene Tan noted that enforcement action could also be taken when the comments are racist. He added that the law gives the government a range of tools to use if needed, “but whether to invoke it is a judgment call”.

Would the cloak of anonymity online pose a challenge to enforcement?

Assistant Professor Tan pointed out that the Government has been able to clamp down on netizens who made seditious comments, citing the case of two bloggers who were convicted and jailed in 2005 for posting anti-Malay/Muslim comments. A third was given a probationary sentence of 24 months.

Fellow SMU law lecturer Jack Lee noted that even if a netizen is charged on nomination day itself, the trial may not take place until the elections are over. “Thus, the only purpose of bringing criminal proceedings would be to serve as a deterrent in future elections, not the present one,” he said.

Assistant Professor Lee explained that under the Act, a person does not run afoul of the law by just making a false statement. The prosecution will need to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the statement was intended to dissuade electors from voting for a particular candidate.

Opposition politician Goh Meng Seng felt there was no need to take “online chit chat” seriously. “If you are too thin-skinned, then I don’t think you fit the job of a politician,” said Mr Goh.