

March 22, 2006

UPFRONT: ELECTION WATCH

Supporting roles come to the fore in run-up

By Tee Hun Ching

WHENEVER the battle for votes hots up, some People's Action Party (PAP) branch activists in Aljunied GRC know they can look forward to a cold treat.

A freezer of ice-cream will arrive at the Kembangan-Punggol election office and it will remain well-stocked right up to Polling Day, paid for by a branch member or supporter.

'It has been a tradition here for the last few general elections,' said Mr Abdul Halim Kader, a veteran election agent and branch deputy chairman.

'It is a small gesture to thank the helpers for their hard work.'

When it comes to gearing up for the polls, the ruling PAP leaves nothing to chance.

Every small detail, from working the ground to ensuring that supporters are fed and watered, is inked into its battle plan, which appears to have three layers.

First, the battleground. Singapore is divided into five districts: North-west, South-west, Central, North-east and South-east, each with its own strategists, comprising ministers and MPs.

Within the divisions are standing committees for the 14 group representation constituencies (GRCs).

Each GRC standing committee is made up of the five or six MPs serving there.

These committees coordinate activities at the third level: the party branches in all 84 wards, including the single seats.

In each ward, party activists will form an election committee, with sub-committees to look after everything from logistics to publicity, finance, welfare and feedback.

As signs point to Polling Day probably falling in the second quarter of this year, the party's well-oiled election machinery is now in high gear.

Armed with street directories, its helpers have begun scouting for prime spots to put up posters and banners. Top of their list: lamp posts near traffic junctions, food centres and anywhere that can grab more eyeballs.

Most of the work goes on quietly.

Several party activists declined to be interviewed, saying they had been told not to speak to the press. 'Why should we help the opposition to fight us?' reasoned one.

But the resource-thin opposition would be hard put to match the PAP's meticulous planning.

PAP activists like to say that right after a general election, they start planning for the next polls, with MPs and branch activists drawing up a schedule of block and house visits.

'You don't want to be in a situation where people say, 'Wah, I see you only when election is coming', ' said Mr Charles Chong, an MP for Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC who has contested in four general elections since 1988.

'The work has to be ongoing.'

However, as the election buzz grows, the pace has quickened and the scope broadened.

Potential speakers at election rallies are recruited, buses booked for supporters, issues raised at Meet-the-People sessions collated. Eyes are peeled and ears pricked for any activity from the opposition camp.

Stacks of new white polo T-shirts with the PAP's lightning-bolt logo are already sitting in some branch offices.

The run-up to a general election is also when voters feel they can ask for more, said Mr Chong, who takes care of the Punggol South ward.

The number turning up at his Meet-the-People session on Mondays has doubled to more than 70 in recent weeks. 'There is a sense of, 'I want to see what you can do for me now', ' he said.

Once Nomination Day is announced, the election engine goes into overdrive.

A day or two before the big day, those in charge of publicity will gather at the ward's election office to get stacks of the candidates' posters ready.

This includes affixing a permit sticker to each one as required by law.

'It's like a factory conveyor belt and everyone chips in. Spirits are high and there is an intense sense of camaraderie,' said Mr Ong Kian Min, a two-term MP for Tampines GRC.

At the close of nominations, there is a scramble for the best lamp posts.

From then on, the election offices become a war-room as candidates and their aides plan their campaigns.

In every contested ward, a group of party helpers will go around daily to make sure that all banners and posters are intact. Those damaged or defaced are replaced promptly.

As the campaign moves along, the welfare sub-committee comes to the fore.

'Food and drinks are very important and require careful preparation as we don't want our supporters

to eat the same food every meal for 10 days in a row,' said Mr Ong.

Caterers provide breakfasts of roti prata or noodles. Lunch and dinner are often rice or noodles accompanied by different halal dishes.

'Sometimes, the helpers bring their own specialties, like curry with bread, porridge or prawn noodles,' he added.

Fifteen-hour days are common through to Polling Day, said MPs.

A critical part of the campaign is the hush-hush business of gathering feedback. A handpicked team fans out to opposition rallies not just to hear what is said, but also to record the crowd reactions.

'For instance, if the opposition fellow talks about abolishing the Central Provident Fund and the crowd goes wild, you would know it is an issue to look out for,' said a grassroots volunteer.

Aside from party activists, volunteers regularly show up offering to help too, said a former MP.

They might include cabbies, deliverymen and contractors offering to help ferry equipment or drinks to election rally sites.

Of the 200 to 300 people working for each ward ahead of the general election, about a quarter would be these unfamiliar faces, he added. 'These are party loyalists who come to your aid when you need it the most.'

Housewives bearing pots of red bean soup, chicken curry or fried beehoon will also show up to bolster the troops' morale.

The most tireless, perhaps, are those in the entourage accompanying the candidates on house-to-house visits. It is not just about breaking the ice; there is etiquette to observe, too.

They make sure residents are not kept waiting too long, with the advance party usually just one door ahead of the candidate.

'Even when you think your legs can't hold out anymore, you just have to keep going,' said one MP.

'How can you quit when your helpers are working so hard for you?'

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