

EAC understands and respects Government's decision to postpone 2020 Legislative Council General Election

The following is issued on behalf of the Electoral Affairs Commission:

In response to the Government's announcement of postponement of the 2020 Legislative Council General Election (LCGE) today (July 31), the Electoral Affairs Commission (EAC) expressed understanding and respect over the Government's decision.

A spokesman for the EAC said, "The 2020 LCGE was originally scheduled for September 6. The EAC learnt that in view of the severe epidemic situation of COVID-19, the Government has decided to postpone the 2020 LCGE. The EAC understands and respects the Government's decision, and will coordinate on the practical arrangements for postponement."

"In fact, in the light of the latest epidemic situation, the EAC wrote to the Chief Executive on July 28 expressing concerns over impacts of the COVID-19 on the election," the spokesman said.

"The Registration and Electoral Office (REO) has all along been closely liaising with the Centre for Health Protection on the precautions for COVID-19 in this LCGE and working on plans of preventive measures. Advice on preventive measures focuses on two major aspects: maintaining social distancing and staying alert to personal hygiene. While maintaining social distancing and personal hygiene complement each other, co-operation from members of the public is necessary.

"The REO has been working proactively to set up more polling stations and recruit more polling staff with a view to speeding up the diversion of crowd. Over 610 polling stations will be set up to serve more than 4.46 million eligible electors on the polling day originally scheduled for September 6. The REO endeavours to implement various personal hygiene measures such as checking of body temperature before entering into polling stations, wearing of masks and use of alcohol-based handrub. However, taking into account the experience gained from the 2019 District Council Ordinary Election where more than 70 per cent of electors cast their votes, group gathering inside and outside the polling stations with difficulty in maintaining safe social distancing is foreseeable and inevitable.

"On the other hand, the REO has spared no effort in borrowing larger venues for use as polling stations. However, since Hong Kong is densely populated, there are limitations on sizes of the polling stations, as well as finding conveniently located and suitable polling stations. The REO will also set up more ballot paper issuing desks to speed up the issuing process. Nevertheless, the issuing process involves indispensable procedures such as

communication among polling staff and electors, identity verification, transaction of documents and ballot papers. The contact and interaction between staff and electors are diametrically contrary to the advice of maintaining social distancing.

"Furthermore, the existing legislation stipulates that the ballots of traditional functional constituencies and the District Council (second) functional constituency must be counted centrally. To ensure that the election is conducted in a fair and open manner, the counting of votes must be open. The central counting station, which is proposed to be set up by the REO, is expected to accommodate nearly 10 000 people including candidates and their agents, the media and members of the public who will observe the counting process that needs to be carried out overnight. Apart from the risk of group gathering, the staff at the central counting station require frequent exchange of documents. Basically it is hard to observe social distancing. Even if disease prevention measures are implemented, it will be very challenging to safeguard the health of the staff and other attendees.

"In addition, many people are currently under compulsory quarantine. While we are committed to safeguarding their voting rights, we must also take into account the concern of other electors if they can go to the polling stations at ease to cast their votes.

"It is worth noting that, in the month prior to the polling day, the REO needs to arrange some 40 large-scale training sessions for over 30 000 electoral staff, during which large group gathering is expected.

The EAC spokesman pointed out that even though the REO implements various disease prevention measures at polling stations with its utmost efforts, large group gathering is still unavoidable. Requiring all electoral staff and electors to observe social distancing at all time is also difficult. The spokesman reiterated again that the EAC is an independent, apolitical and impartial body which decides on and supervise public election matters in accordance with actual and objective considerations and related legislation.

The spokesman added that follow-up arrangements of the postponement such as how candidates calculate election expenses will be announced in due course after co-ordination between the REO, the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau and other related departments. Candidates are reminded to keep all invoices and receipts concerned.

In view of the Government's decision to postpone the 2020 LCGE, the lots drawing session for candidates to allocate number on ballot papers and online briefing for candidates originally scheduled for August 4 and 6 respectively are cancelled.