

16 September 2013

Oral reply to Parliamentary Question on used empty ballot boxes

Question:

Mr Pritam Singh: To ask the Prime Minister in light of the discovery of used election ballot boxes that are not disposed of in a proper manner (a) who was responsible for the lapse and what action has been taken against the person; (b) whether these boxes are for the 2011 presidential election and, if so, whether there is any breach of section 37 of the Presidential Elections Act; (c) whether there are any other ballot boxes or presidential election paraphernalia that are similarly mishandled in the course of the presidential election; and (d) what role does the Elections Department play in ensuring that such episodes do not occur and what oversight responsibilities does the Elections Department have over their appointed contractors.

Oral reply by Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for Defence:

Let me first assure members of the House that the discovery of used empty “ballot” boxes does not constitute a lapse in the election procedures that ensure the integrity of our election process. There is a rigorous process to ensure security of the vote and voting secrecy at each election. There is no break in the chain of custody of ballot papers from the polling station to the counting centre, and from the counting centre to the Supreme Court where the ballot papers are retained in safe custody for 6 months and then subsequently destroyed. For transparency, the process is open to observation by candidates and their agents who are present.

2 Ballot boxes are boxes so designated and used for the deposit of ballots cast in an election on Polling Day. These boxes are marked and shown to be empty to candidates and their polling agents who are present before they are sealed by election officials at the polling station before the start of the polls on Polling Day. These boxes are treated from this point onwards as controlled items for use for the casting of ballots. After the polls have closed, election officials at the polling station seal these ballot boxes containing the ballot papers which have been cast. Candidates and their polling agents who are present witness the process and may also place their own seals on the ballot boxes. The sealed ballot boxes carried by the election officials are then transported under Police escort to the counting centre. A police officer is on board the bus used and stands guard over the ballot boxes throughout the entire journey.

3 At the counting centre, before the ballot boxes are opened, candidates and their counting agents who are present may inspect all the boxes again to ascertain that all the boxes are accounted for, and no others are present; and that the seals of all the ballot boxes are intact and have not been tampered with. The seals are then broken and the ballot boxes are opened, and the ballot papers therein are poured out, sorted and counted. The emptied ballot boxes are ascertained in the presence of all to be empty and cease to be a controlled item and are put aside with other discarded material to be collected by the Elections Department's contractor for general disposal.

4 After the election result has been announced by the Returning Officer, the ballot papers and other official documents used in the election are placed into separate boxes and sealed, witnessed by the candidates and their counting agents who are present, who may also place their own seals on these boxes. These boxes are then conveyed by Police escort and retained in safe custody for 6 months at the Supreme Court. After 6 months, they are destroyed by incineration, unless directed by order of the President.

5 The empty ballot boxes set aside at the counting centres, along with other paraphernalia like disused writing material, emergency lanterns and other equipment and leftover general items are supposed to be collected by a contractor appointed by the Elections Department, from the counting centres the day after Polling Day. In the event that the contractor is unable to collect all or any of these items the day after Polling Day, such items are then kept in the storeroom for the contractor to collect at another date. The used and empty boxes and other debris collected are disposed of by the contractor. This arrangement has been in place for years over several elections without issue.

6 The fact that some boxes were recently found clearly suggests an oversight by working personnel on the ground involved in the collection of such discarded material after Polling Day. Although as I had explained this does not constitute a lapse in the election process proper, I have directed the Elections Department to study how such an incident can be prevented in future to avoid undue alarm or confusion. However such a tightened process to ensure disposal of such discarded material and debris should be practical and not onerous.

7 Following this incident, the Elections Department has also since checked with all the 164 schools that were used as counting centres to see if there are any other such discarded empty used ballot boxes or other similarly non-controlled election paraphernalia or items kept in their stores. They have since found several such disused boxes in the stores of 5 schools used as counting centres. These will be collected by the contractor for general disposal.

8 Member of Parliament Mr Pritam Singh asked whether there is any breach of section 37 of the Presidential Elections Act with regards to this specific case. The investigation by the Police thus far shows that there is no offence disclosed under section 37 of the Act, which relates to the tampering of ballot boxes before and while in use, but investigations continue as to the unauthorised removal of these disused boxes from a locked storeroom.