

Electoral Boundaries Review Committee convened, PM Lee tells Parliament

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The convening of the committee, which reviews and draws up the boundaries for constituencies, is typically a sign that the next General Election could be held soon.

SINGAPORE: Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has asked the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) to have smaller Group Representation Constituencies, and to have at least 12 Single Member Constituencies.

The committee was formed two months ago, the Prime Minister told Parliament on Monday (Jul 13).

Mr Lee said he asked the committee to consider the population shifts and housing developments since the last boundary delineation exercise.

He also asked the committee to have smaller GRCs, "so as to reduce the average size of the GRCs below five", and to have at least 12 SMCs.

"As per past practice, the committee is chaired by the Secretary to the Prime Minister. It is now in the midst of its deliberations and will make its recommendations to me when ready," he said.

This prompted Non-Constituency Member of Parliament Yee Jenn Jong of the Workers' Party to ask if the Prime Minister could commit to a minimum time period of at least six months between the release of the report to elections.

"It has been as short as one day from the report to the calling of elections in the past," said Mr Yee. "A longer period will allow residents who have been moved out from their constituencies to be able to adjust to the changes."

In response, Mr Lee said: "The committee will publish its report to the maximum extent possible. We will make sure there's enough time elapsed so that everybody can read the report, understand it and know where they stand before elections are called.

"But I don't think it is possible to say that we promise a certain minimum period such as six months, because it depends very much on the exigencies on the situation and on when elections become necessary."

In response to another question by Mr Yee, Mr Lee said that while Singapore would consider bringing in outside expertise to advise the EBRC, it is unlikely to have different political parties working on the boundary recommendations.

On the composition of the EBRC: "It has for many years comprised civil servants who have domain knowledge which enables them to make considered decisions on how to divide up the constituencies - taking into account, as I have said, population shifts, housing developments, and also how to do this in a practical sort of way, so that we do not have complete upheaval each time there is redemarcation," said the Prime Minister.

"If there is a need for outside expertise I think that can be considered. We have no hesitation to look for outside expertise.

"As for bringing in political parties I'm not sure that's entirely a good idea. The Americans do it with political parties, and the way it is done is usually that the sitting members (of the House of Representatives) decide on a demarcation.

"And usually what happens is that they carve it up among themselves. It's a political deal and I think that's not a good arrangement and it's best we leave this to the civil servants to work at."

SIGNAL OF AN UPCOMING GENERAL ELECTION?

The committee reviews and draws up the boundaries for election, and submits a report with its recommendations. The report, when released by the committee, is seen as one of the clearest signals that a General Election (GE) is around the corner.

The convening of the committee kickstarts a series of events that culminates in the nation heading to the polls. Singapore's next GE must be held by January 2017.

The expected sequence of events is as follows:

1. Electoral Boundaries Review Committee convenes
2. Committee submits report with recommendations on electoral changes

In the lead-up to the two previous GEs in 2006 and 2011, the committee took about four months after being convened to issue its report.

3. Parliament dissolved

The Prime Minister may advise the President to dissolve Parliament by Proclamation in the Gazette before the expiry of its term. Once Parliament has been dissolved, the GE must be held within three months. In the last GE, the committee's report was issued on Feb 24, 2011, and Parliament was dissolved on Apr 19, 2011.

4. President issues Writ of Election

The President, acting on the Prime Minister's advice, issues a Writ of Election. This will specify the date and location for the nomination of candidates.

5. Nomination Day takes place

Nomination Day, when prospective candidates submit their nomination papers, must take place between five days and one month after the Writ of Election is issued.

6. Polling Day

Polling Day must be held between 10 and 56 days after the Returning Officer publishes the Notice of Contested Elections after Nomination Day. For the 2011 GE, Cooling-Off Day, on the eve of Polling Day, was introduced, when candidates are banned from

campaigning. This was instituted to give voters time to reflect and make their decision before going to the polls.

SMALLER GRCs, GREATER POLITICAL PARTICIPATION?

The minutes of the committee's meetings will not be made public. "I don't believe it is helpful to have every twist and turn in minutes reported and published," said Mr Lee. "I think the committee's report is the final word."

Leading up to the last elections in 2011, Mr Lee had given similar terms of reference to the EBRC. He wanted fewer six-member GRCs, and at least 12 SMCs.

Today, there are only two six-member GRCs. They are two of the largest constituencies in Singapore - Pasir Ris-Punggol with over 200,000 registered voters and Ang Mo Kio, with about 180,000 electors.

One observer said such a move paves the way for greater political participation.

"The broad criticism about the larger GRCs - the six-men, the five-men GRCs - is that it makes it a hurdle for smaller opposition parties to come up with a good set of people," said Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Police Studies, Dr Gillian Koh. "But we've seen in the last election in 2011, we see a higher level of activity, higher level of interest among opposition parties to go and gun for GRCs."

She said with smaller GRCs and more single-member seats, there are likely to be more changes in electoral boundaries for the upcoming election, compared to GE2011.

"My wager is you will see a lot more re-drawing of boundaries vis-a-vis 2011," said Dr Koh. "In a way, it allows more parties to play. It seems fairer that you have smaller GRCs, but when you do that, it is inevitable that you will also have changes in the boundaries, back and forth."