

Electoral boundaries committee formed: What it means for Singapore's GE

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The review of electoral boundaries by a committee is now under way and while that marks the first step towards a General Election (GE) in Singapore, political watchers think it could take several months before a vote is called, with one pencilling it to be nine months down the road.

The Elections Department on Wednesday (Sep 4) announced that the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) has been convened, and it has been directed to review the current electoral boundaries and recommend the number and boundaries of Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) and Single-Member Constituencies (SMCs).

"It is now in the midst of its deliberations and will make its recommendations to the Prime Minister when it has completed its review," the statement said.

The formation of the EBRC and the submission of its subsequent report are key processes that need to be completed before a GE. The next GE must be held by April 2021.

Law professor Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University (SMU) said the setting up of the EBRC is "as good as the starter's gun being fired for the election contest".

Political parties could start ramping up their preparations, he added. "In the weeks ahead, we might see the ruling party, for example, having unofficial introductions of prospective candidates during ministerial walkabouts or meet-the-people sessions."

But Associate Professor Tan ruled out the possibility of a GE this year, adding that it will likely take place after the next Budget.

"I think elections are about nine months away," he told CNA in a phone interview.

"It could also be less than nine months because if we are talking about immediately after the Budget, that would put us in April which means about seven months."

Laying out his reasoning, the political commentator said: "It can't take place before the Budget because there just isn't enough time for the new Parliament to sit for the first time and unveil a Budget."

He reckoned that it is the plan for the current Government to announce Budget 2020, given that it will be "a very significant one" following several key announcements by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong earlier this month at the National Day Rally.

This includes the potential cost of S\$100 billion over 100 years for Singapore to tackle climate change and rising sea levels.

Mr Lee also mentioned that a "support package" will be introduced during the next Budget to help businesses cope with the planned increases in the country's retirement and re-employment ages.

“Significant financial provisions will have to be made for these major policy announcements,” said Assoc Prof Tan, noting that the Government has accumulated a healthy surplus accumulated since the start of its term.

“I think we can see much of these being used to fund most of the announcements ... But the Government will try to show that the spending isn’t extravagant and should be seen as an investment in the future.

“They will use it to show their ability in judiciously using public funds and having the fiscal prudence to plan for the long term – qualities they would like to showcase before voters,” added the SMU law don.

Asked what the set-up of the EBRC means for the timing of GE, another political watcher Gillian Koh said: “Many are conscious that a GE is in the offing. However, it can still be some time before the EBRC completes its work. We are talking about several months.”

Wednesday’s media release from the Elections Department said the committee has been directed to further reduce the average size of the GRCs and to have more than the current 13 SMCs.

It added that in reviewing the electoral boundaries, the EBRC has to take into consideration significant changes in the number of electors in the current electoral divisions, as a result of population shifts and housing development.

The size of GRCs has been steadily reduced since 2011, political watchers said, though the Prime Minister reiterated in January 2016 that he wants to further reduce the average size of GRCs and create more SMCs.

Referring to that speech made in Parliament, Dr Koh, the deputy director of research at local think tank Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said: “This request has been made before but what’s different this time round is the Prime Minister has taken a lot of pains to emphasise that he’ll like this to be done.

Given how there are now 16 GRCs and 13 SMCs, Dr Koh added that the changing of the boundaries to achieve smaller GRCs and more SMCs “is not an easy exercise”.

“The EBRC will have more extensive work to do than ordinarily so, where the primary consideration is about changes in population size of the existing constituencies to see if changes are justified,” she told CNA.

Apart from population size, “some sense of community identity on the ground must also feed into the EBRC’s considerations”, Dr Koh added.

“This is because members of the public have appealed to such considerations in the past. Electoral boundaries shape who residents consider their representatives – they have to help residents feel that they can identify with each other and more critically, they will shape which residents benefit from which local policies and programmes long after the GE.”

Overall, the political commentator from IPS said: "These are extensive changes and it would be understandable that it would take slightly longer than usual."

The EBRC generally takes two to four months to complete its review on the constituencies and their boundaries, before making its recommendations in a report.

The Prime Minister has to accept the report and send it to Parliament. The changes are then gazetted and the report made public.

For GE2011, the Prime Minister received the EBRC report on Feb 21. Parliament was dissolved on Apr 19 and the GE was held on May 7.

In 2015, the EBRC's report was sent to the Prime Minister on Jul 21. The GE that year was held less than two months later, on Sep 11, after Parliament was dissolved on Aug 25.

POTENTIAL CHANGES?

Political watchers also gave their expectations on how electoral boundaries and divisions could change for the coming GE.

Older estates where people have moved out and burgeoning new neighbourhoods, such as Punggol and Sengkang, could see boundaries being tweaked, reckoned Assoc Prof Tan.

On what recommendations the committee could make to the size of the GRCs and the number of SMCs, Dr Koh said: "If you want to lower the average size of GRCs, you may have to deal with the larger GRCs."

Of the current GRCs, two have six Members of Parliament (MPs) and eight have five MPs. The remaining six are four-member GRCs.

SMU's Assoc Prof Tan thinks the average GRC size could dip further to 4.5 for the upcoming GE, from 4.75 in 2015 and 5 in 2011.

"That will mean fewer five-member GRCs and more four-member GRCs," he said.

"Maybe there will be a re-introduction of three-member GRCs, though I'm quite sceptical because if you talk about town councils, there could be the consideration that they may not be able to reap the economies of scale."

Three-member GRCs were introduced for the first and last time in GE 1988 – the year when GRCs were first implemented – according to the SMU law professor.

As for SMCs, that could see an "incremental" increase from the current 13 to either 14 or 15 in the coming GE, he added.

To cope with the population rise since the last election, Assoc Prof Tan also said that he "would not be too surprised" if the EBRC recommends having "one or two more elected seats".

Overall, the move towards having smaller GRCs and more SMCs shows the Government responding to voters' expectations.

Said Assoc Prof Tan: "I think voters want a more level playing field electorally and a closer identification with their MP, which a large GRC very often has that distancing effect."

Echoing that, Dr Koh said: "These changes in the boundaries as directed by the Prime Minister are for a good reason – to raise the level of contestability in the General Election."

"This means that parties, especially the smaller opposition parties will feel that they can enter the contest as the barriers to entry have been lowered. There are more single and smaller GRC seats so that they do not need huge resources and a vast number of candidates to seek to represent residents in their preferred spots of the island," she added.