

Smaller GRCs, more SMCs may boost GE contestability, a positive step for democracy in Singapore: Political observers

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The removal of six-member Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) and smaller constituencies could be a good thing for opposition parties that typically have difficulties forming bigger teams, political observers said on Friday (Mar 13).

There will be 14 Single Member Constituencies (SMCs), one more than the current 13. The two existing six-member GRCs – Ang Mo Kio and Pasir Ris-Punggol – have been reduced to five members, while Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC, which currently has five MPs, will now be a four-member GRC.

The next General Election (GE) has to be called by April next year.

Deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies Dr Gillian Koh said the changes increase the contestability of elections, which means more parties might find the size less intimidating, and if they are small, they are more able to contemplate contesting in them. This is the principle of contestability, she said.

“Raising its (contestability) level is a positive step for democracy in the case of Singapore. It must be possible for more or all political parties to feel that they can present their political alternatives to the people,” she said in response to queries from CNA after the release of the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee report.

The parties should feel that they are able to contest in SMCs and GRCs, instead of feeling that there are too many barriers to entry in terms of resources that they do not have, said Dr Koh, who is also a senior research fellow in the Governance and Economy Department.

“These moves are good for the smaller opposition parties – they make an election seem fairer to them,” she said.

She also noted that there are no changes to the boundaries of constituencies held by the “leading” opposition party, Workers’ Party (WP), which is good for them, she said.

Former Member of Parliament (MP) Inderjit Singh offered a similar analysis.

There have been constant calls to reduce the size of GRCs to be fairer to the opposition as they generally have difficulties forming bigger teams to compete, he said.

“I believe the opposition parties will feel they have a better chance in some of the constituencies now,” he said.

However, he added that it is not unexpected that the sizes of the GRCs would decrease, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had already indicated that he wanted such changes.

CHANGES TO MAKE PAP STRONGER IN SOME WARDS

While Mr Singh called the changes “fair” and not done to benefit just the ruling People’s Action Party, changes to constituencies like East Coast and West Coast benefit the PAP more, he said.

The East Coast and West Coast GRCs, which currently have four MPs, will have five seats. Fengshan SMC, which was carved out of the East Coast GRC in the last GE in 2015, has been re-absorbed into the GRC.

Both Punggol East and Sengkang West will be absorbed into a new Sengkang GRC. Mr Singh said that Punggol East being dissolved could be put to incumbent Charles Chong probably retiring.

“The PAP would be taking risks sending a new candidate to the SMC,” he said.

Dr Koh noted that the closest fights among the SMCs in the last GE were Punggol East, Fengshan and Sengkang West, which have now been wiped off the map.

“It is notable that they are now absorbed into larger entities. This will ease the pressure on the incumbents there ... These changes favour the PAP in reducing the risk of a weak showing if there has been no shift in political opinion and affiliation in the ground from the last election,” she said.

Political analyst Mustafa Izzuddin said the dissolution of the three SMCs could be a setback for WP, which had contested all three in 2015 and where the WP had been working the ground.

“Party leaders may need to revise and refashion their electoral strategy for the upcoming election,” said the research fellow with the National University of Singapore’s Institute of South Asian Studies.

WHEN WILL THE GENERAL ELECTION BE CALLED?

The EBRC issuing its report puts Singapore a step closer to a GE, said Dr Koh.

“There can be months before it is called but it does place all political parties on notice,” she said.

“A contest is imminent and they have to decide where they wish to contest and which candidates to field.”

Parties will also need to handle issues such as finding “good people” to nominate and assent to candidates, as well as readying election deposits, she added.

“My own reading is that GE will be called very soon, in a month or two,” said Mr Singh.

The PAP will want to quickly form a strong government to tackle issues such as the economy and the coronavirus outbreak, which could last a few years, he said.

“Waiting too long may hurt the economy and Singapore more than calling a snap election now,” he added.

However, given the “social distancing” guidelines put in place on Friday - including restrictions on gatherings of more than 250 people - political analyst Felix Tan said it is unlikely that the election will be called in the coming weeks.

“Rallies and campaigning would be a little bit challenging,” said the SIM Global Education associate lecturer.

While such restrictions put an election in either March and April “out of the question”, he expects that it may be called in May when the COVID-19 situation here is likely to be “more settled”, adding that voters are already expecting an election this year.

“If May is too much of a risk given the COVID-19 crisis, the last quarter of 2020 is a possibility,” said Dr Mustafa.

“Either way, what is certain enough is that the election will likely be held this year because the Government has tended not to favour holding an election the year it is due, which in this instance is 2021.”

IMPACT OF COVID-19

The ruling party’s handling of the current COVID-19 crisis, which has won praise from international bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), is likely to give it a strong mandate in the coming election, analysts said.

“I think what we are seeing is that the Government is handling the pandemic pretty well,” said Dr Tan, adding this is likely to sway voters towards the incumbent PAP.

Having an election while the COVID-19 outbreak may still possibly escalate will give the advantage to parties that have been “tending the political ground on an on-going basis”, said Dr Koh.

This benefits the incumbent party if voters feel that it has provided “a firm and steady hand in government” in guiding the country through the outbreak, she added.

Recent policy reforms in areas such as education, housing and cost of living may suggest to voters that their concerns are being addressed, she noted.

“So apart from the politics, the PAP may be viewed as having done its homework and has policies that put it in a good place politically, quite apart from the question of how it is managing the COVID-19 situation.”

A second stimulus package, which Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said was in the works to address both the global economic downturn and the COVID-19 outbreak, may be something the PAP is offering as part of its election strategy, said Dr Koh.

“That may be a somewhat controversial strategy but it is also something that many voters do ask for – to spend the reserves on a rainy day which seems to have arrived,” she said, noting this comes after political leaders had committed to forfeiting one month's pay in light of the coronavirus.

"The gestures will certainly be noticed and discussed in the hustings," she said.