

Parliament; Smaller GRCs, more seats could see more contests

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Opposition hits out at lack of notice on timing and lack of transparency

Yesterday's announcement that the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) had been formed two months ago may have created a ripple of excitement among voters.

But among politicians, analysts and activists for whom an imminent general election (GE) was long suspected, it was Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's promise of smaller GRCs that was notable.

He has tasked the EBRC to reduce the average size of Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) to below five.

The current average is five.

CLOSER TO RESIDENTS

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PAP MP LIM BIOW CHUAN (MOUNTBATTEN), on SMCs

Yesterday, Democratic Progressive Party secretary-general Benjamin Pwee praised the smaller sizes, saying that "smaller GRCs mean fewer MPs who get into Parliament on the coat-tails of others".

"It should also translate to more realistic boundaries and population sizes that can be looked after by each MP," he added.

PM Lee also said yesterday in Parliament that at least 12 Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) - the current number - would be on the electoral map.

This was welcomed by People's Action Party (PAP) MP Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten), who said he hoped to see more than 12 SMCs for the coming general election: "In a single-seat ward, an MP is closer to residents because he knows he's wholly responsible for them. In a GRC, people pick and choose. Some of them naturally gravitate towards a minister."

GRCs were introduced in 1988 to ensure a minimum number of representatives from the minority races in Parliament.

The Parliamentary Elections Act was changed in 1991 and again in 1996 to increase the maximum number of members per GRC from three to four, and then to six.

Both times, the Government cited economies of scale in combining estates, rather than multiracialism, as a reason.

Political analyst Derek da Cunha believes that the PAP has "done its own internal modelling" and concluded that a return to smaller- sized GRCs would be to its advantage.

More electoral divisions "would not be an issue for the PAP, which can field a veritable army of thousands of campaign staff who can go canvassing for votes door to door... But it would be challenging for the minor opposition parties that are relatively resource-poor," he told The Straits Times.

He added that whatever the committee decides on should not come as too great a surprise to the Workers' Party (WP), as its chief, Mr Low Thia Kiang, tends to "plan on the basis of the worst-case scenario".

But Mr Low's approach, he said, is very different from that of other "minor parties, which tend to be perennially optimistic but are often caught surprised, unprepared and under-resourced".

PM Lee's delay of two months before announcing the EBRC's formation was criticised by opposition parties yesterday. In 2011, he had announced the committee's formation on the day he convened it.

The Singapore Democratic Party said in a statement that "such a non-transparent approach to elections continues to make the playing field heavily tilted in the PAP's favour".

It called for the campaign period to be a minimum of three weeks. The Prime Minister has traditionally allowed for a campaign period of nine days.

WP's Non-Constituency MP Yee Jenn Jong said that "different political parties should be given time to adjust as that's the hallmark of a democratic country. It cannot be that only one side knows the timing regarding the election".

He urged a longer gestation period before the polls, telling The Straits Times that a period of six months to a year between the release of the boundaries report and the election would be a reasonable amount of time to allow voters and parties to process the report.

The committee's formation two months ago makes a 2015 GE very likely, said analysts - a departure from the five-year cycle PM Lee followed in 2006 and 2011.

Institute of Policy Studies senior fellow Gillian Koh said this means that the "regularity" of the last two GEs could be an exception, which might not be welcomed by some voters.

"A party like the PAP that has ruled Singapore since 1959 cannot avoid the heavy responsibility of ensuring that the system continues to be deemed to be legitimate in the eyes of those who matter - whether it is the opinion makers or broad swathes of voters on the ground," she said.

But East Asian Institute political scientist Lam Peng Er said it was the PAP's prerogative to call the election whenever it wanted, and that Singaporeans are savvy enough to see past any electioneering. "All's fair in love and war and politics," he said.