

Changes to NCMP scheme 'meet desire for more diverse voices'

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Singapore's plan to raise the minimum number of opposition members in Parliament will strengthen the two-party system and satisfy the electorate's desire for more alternative voices, said observers.

But some felt that giving Non-Constituency MPs more voting rights could undermine the legitimacy of elected representatives.

The academics and former politicians interviewed by *The Straits Times* were commenting on proposed changes to the NCMP scheme announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in Parliament on Wednesday.

Mr Lee said that he intended to raise the minimum number of opposition MPs in Parliament, including NCMPs, from nine to 12, and give NCMPs the same voting rights as elected MPs.

The scheme was first introduced in 1991 to allow the best-performing opposition party losers at a general election to still make it to Parliament.

Institute of Policy Studies deputy director for research Gillian Koh said the changes "ensure a two-party, if not 1.5-party, system in Singapore".

With at least 12 seats, opposition parties will have a sizeable presence in the House, she said. There are currently 89 elected MPs in this Parliament, plus two NCMPs.

Former Nominated MP Shrinivas Rai, meanwhile, said the proposed changes would make Singapore's system more representative, and combines the best of the first-past-the-post electoral system with the proportional system.

In a first-past-the-post system, the candidate with the most votes in any given constituency wins a seat in Parliament. In proportional systems, parties are allocated seats according to their vote share.

By expanding the NCMP scheme, more of the candidates who did well, but did not win seats, will make it to Parliament, he said.

"In some constituencies, the opposition has close to 40 per cent of the vote," he noted.

National University of Singapore political scientist Hussin Mutalib, who is against the NCMP scheme in general, felt that having 12 guaranteed opposition seats may deter people from voting for the opposition come election time.

Other observers, including Dr Koh, disagreed. She said that Singaporeans would still cast their votes based on how capable a candidate is and how credible his party is.

But Dr Hussin said voters had to learn "the harsh lesson" if they did not "vote wisely".

If voters did not vote for opposition candidates at the polls, then they have to "be prepared to accept an outcome where the august Parliament is deprived of" robust debates on policies and laws, he said.

Former MPs interviewed were generally supportive of raising the minimum number of opposition MPs in Parliament.

But they also cautioned that giving NCMPs the same voting powers as elected MPs could undermine the legitimacy of the latter group.

Previously, NCMPs could not vote on matters such as constitutional changes, votes of no confidence and removing a president from office. But with the change, they will be allowed to vote on these matters.

Mr S. Chandra Das said giving both types of MPs equal voting powers would not be fair to the elected MPs who would have worked hard to win their seats in the elections.

Mr Inderjit Singh agreed, saying that NCMPs do not have the same responsibilities as elected MPs.

Constituency work and municipal issues form the bulk of the work MPs do, he said, adding that "NCMPs don't formally represent any constituency and thus don't have the same responsibilities as their elected peers".

PM Lee had said on Wednesday when proposing the changes that with NCMPs having the same voting rights as elected MPs, "there will be no reason at all to perceive NCMPs as being second-class".

Referring to this, Mr Alvin Yeo wondered if the public opinion on NCMPs would change.

"I'm not sure the public would necessarily see it that way," he said.