

Creating a buzz in Parliament

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What do changes to the electoral system mean for the dominant ruling party, the opposition, and Singapore's political system? Insight examines the issues.

PEOPLE'S Action Party (PAP) backbenchers were as surprised as the rest of Singapore when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong unveiled his planned changes to the electoral system on Wednesday.

In one fell swoop, the guaranteed number of opposition MPs in Parliament will be increased to nine, including non-constituency MPs (NCMPs) who come from the best-losing candidates in an election.

The 'men in white' will have to contend with at least one-fifth of the House that is not from the ruling party.

In addition, at least three more PAP candidates will have to stand in single-seat wards in the next General Election.

Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Inderjit Singh sums up the sentiments of ruling party MPs regarding the increase in guaranteed opposition seats when he tells Insight: 'We have to improve ourselves, and be on our toes.'

There will also be more pressure on the front bench, which will have to deal with questions from more opposition members, adds Holland-Bukit Timah GRC MP Liang Eng Hwa.

He notes that political discourse will be 'more vibrant and active', which is 'good for political development overall'.

What is the Government's underlying reason for the changes?

In outlining them, PM Lee said having more alternative voices in Parliament would 'generate more robust debate, improve policy formulation, expose PAP MPs to the cut and thrust of debate (and) demonstrate what the opposition can and cannot do'.

But why the need to generate more robust debate, and introduce refinements to the system that in effect will make life harder for PAP Ministers and MPs, and give more opposition members an easier ride into Parliament?

Easing political tension

IN SINGAPORE, a dominant party has enjoyed the privilege of ruling for 50 years because it has delivered the goods.

But the system has become such that while the PAP is comfortably ensconced in the House with an overwhelming majority of seats, a significant and vocal 'opposition' can be found on the ground and on the Internet.

At each General Election, about 30 per cent of Singaporeans vote for the opposition, but the latter's percentage of seats has been minuscule, thanks to the Westminster model's first-past-the-post system.

The result is a significant degree of cynicism towards the Government on the ground. 'Many of these views find their way online and on Internet forums, so much so that MPs have to look at blogs for issues to discuss,' political observer Zulkifli Baharudin tells Insight.

The latest moves to check the size of GRCs and raise the number of NCMPs could release some tension within the system.

Strengthening the PAP

ON ANOTHER level, the changes enable the PAP to strengthen its position by inviting its top opponents into the parliamentary fold, so as to socialise them into being a constructive opposition that can toughen up its own ranks to deal with a more demanding electorate.

Much as wolves within a forest keep the deer lean and fit, a robust opposition presence in Parliament keeps the ruling party in good enough shape to rule effectively.

While some may see the latest moves as not bold enough, Mr Liang feels it is 'enough to keep up with the times and in the process maintain political stability'.

This forcible creation of a parliamentary opposition is unique because of 'the irony of it all', says Mr Zulkifli.

Mr Zulkifli, a former Nominated MP (NMP), says an overwhelmingly strong government is doing something it really does not have to because of 'it has paid the price of its own success'.

Adds Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC MP Josephine Teo: 'The PAP is saying that it has the privilege of dominance, but recognises that this is not necessarily a good thing for future political stability.'

Raising participation

NOMINATED MP Thio Li-ann, a constitutional law professor at the National University of Singapore, says the changes focus on enhancing participatory politics without sacrificing the current system, which is oriented towards throwing up a strong government as defined by the PAP.

For her, a strong government is one which has the support of a two-thirds majority of the House, thereby giving it free rein to amend the Constitution.

In the current House, 56 seats would yield such a majority. Professor Thio therefore wonders if 25 seats can be 'lost' by the PAP in an election without causing panic.

She feels the changes show that the Government sees the virtue of non-government voices in Parliament to serve the functions of 'grievance articulation' or 'interest representation'.

'It is more consultative politics, rather than contestational politics which the government views as destabilising.'

Improving representation

THE increase in the number of NCMPs allowed in Parliament from six to nine is 'very generous' and means that 'the views of those who voted for the losing side will be represented', says NMP Loo Choon Yong.

Indeed, it can be argued that the enhancements to the NCMP scheme means a more proportional representation of opposition voters in Parliament, whether intended that way or not.

When PM Lee announced the changes on Wednesday, he noted that there could have been up to seven NCMPs after the 2006 General Election if the changes had been in place then, instead of just one.

NMP Siew Kum Hong earlier this week called for a limited number of seats in the House to be allocated by way of proportional representation, a system common in Europe in which parties are allocated seats based on their share of the popular vote.

In response, PM Lee noted that proportional representation systems are unstable and even hybrid forms of the concept in other countries have made for weak governments.

Notes political observer Gillian Koh: 'Overall, the reforms are a recalibration of the balance between the effects of the first-past-the-post system reinforced by the GRC system where the winner takes all, and schemes that soften that effect.'

'So this itself is a hybrid system to allow for a strong central government yet permit opportunities for smaller parties and opposition politicians to have a spot in Parliament,' said the senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

Improving governance

GIVING opposition members more opportunities in Parliament also enables the Government to better refine and test its policies, notes Mrs Teo.

A greater diversity of views in Parliament - from at least nine elected or non-constituency opposition MPs, plus another nine NMPs - would hopefully lead to the best solutions for the country.

Government policies and changes to the law, especially those with wide-ranging implications, could end up being more robust as they will be more intensely debated in Parliament.

Mrs Teo notes that currently, some people feel parliamentary debate on certain policies is not sufficiently robust.

With the change, she feels 'policies will come with the assurance that they have been thoroughly debated'.

'After all, no one has a monopoly on knowledge and wisdom, so if an idea is better for Singapore, we should welcome it,' she adds.

Democracy, Singapore-style?

BUT a greater diversity of views in Parliament does not necessarily equate with greater democracy, Mr Siew points out.

He sees diversity as an outcome, while democracy is about substantively fair and just procedures.

'We can have a lot of parliamentary diversity simply by appointing many different folks as NMPs, but that would not be democratic,' he says.

'We can have zero diversity if only one party is elected, but it could still be democratic if that party was elected in a fully fair and just election.'

He says that ultimately, Singapore as a democracy has to be evaluated by looking at whether the electoral rules are substantively fair and just.

'From that perspective, we still fall at least a little short, for instance given the lack of transparency in the drawing of electoral boundaries,' he adds.

He feels the proposed changes to the GRC sizes should be written into the law rather than just the terms of reference for the electoral boundaries review committee.

'The fact that there are no clear, transparent rules and guidelines on this point means that it remains open to abuse, and hence detracts from our system's democratic credentials,' he says.

Observers note that the latest changes to Singapore's political system are not the last word, and the system is likely to evolve further.

Dr Koh notes that while the changes are at a pace of the PAP's choosing, the party 'is responding to concerns about various aspects of the political system'.

'This is a trend that we have seen since the last elections - liberalisation of spaces for civil society, for freedom of expression in the media and new media and now the electoral system,' she notes.

'We are all feeling our way forward in seeking to enable the spirit and substance of democracy to flourish within the specific constraints that we face - that of being a young, multiracial nation buffeted by global economic and geopolitical trends.'

Guard against grandstanding

ANOTHER note of caution, this one from Mrs Teo: Citizens have to guard against Singapore's political culture degenerating into one that enjoys political theatre.

'I am wary, because the changes raise the potential for grandstanding and more fireworks in the House,' she tells Insight.

'To the extent that this sharpens our thinking, it is good, but it should not degrade the level of confidence and respect Singaporeans generally have in our political system,' she says.

'If it gets to the point where the man in the street says 'Oh, there they go, their wayang again', all these changes would be in vain,' she adds.

'What we should all do is strengthen the quality of our arguments and up the ante, rather than resort to antics.'



WHAT WILL PEOPLE THINK?

“A key thing is what citizens will think of these reforms. There may be three types of views. First, that the PAP is making it possible to have opposition representation, and it would be a pity if people do not take advantage of this. A second view would be that opposition politicians should not legitimise these schemes but fight tooth and nail for the chance to be fully fledged, duly elected MPs. The third view would be that the PAP is trying to guarantee slots for opposition politicians to fend off any real need to vote aggressively for them. If you recall, that is what the Workers’ Party campaigned on in 2006, warning citizens not to wipe out the opposition with its tagline, ‘You Have A Choice’ (and keep it that way). Hence, this group will think the changes are a way to assure the populace that there will always be opposition representation in Parliament and take away the need to vote for them.”

Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

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Changes to the political system

GRCs: AVERAGE NUMBER OF MPs DOWN
Existing: 5.4
New: Five at most

What it means: Fewer six-member GRCs. Now, there are five of them. Also, there could be four-member GRCs.

SINGLE SEATS: MINIMUM NUMBER RAISED
Existing: Minimum is eight
New: Minimum is 12

What it means: More room for independent candidates and smaller political parties to contest elections.

OPPOSITION MPs, INCLUDING NON-CONSTITUENCY MPs: MINIMUM NUMBER RAISED
Existing: Minimum is three
New: Minimum is nine

What it means: The minimum includes elected opposition MPs. So, Parliament will have at least nine opposition MPs.