

## **Facing up to more opposition voices in Parliament**

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**Singapore's political system is to receive its biggest shake-up in recent years, following a raft of proposed changes. Political Correspondents Jeremy Au Yong and Li Xueying analyse the impact on the PAP and its MPs**

IN THE next few months, Singapore's MPs are set to debate in Parliament some of the most significant changes to the country's political system in recent years.

These changes, proposed last month, will open the door - slightly - to allow more opposition MPs into Parliament.

The tweaks have been regarded by many as a move with the future in mind: Ease some of the pent-up desire for diverse political views now, so that there will not be an explosion later.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong unveiled the proposed changes during the debate on the President's Address at the opening of the new session of Parliament.

He said they were prompted by society's changing needs, with Singaporeans wanting more debate and greater political participation.

Having more alternative voices in Parliament would 'generate more robust debate, improve policy formulation, expose PAP MPs to the cut and thrust of the debate (and) demonstrate what the opposition can and cannot do', he added.

The new ideas include: entrenching the 20-year-old Nominated MP scheme; increasing the minimum number of opposition MPs in Parliament from three to nine via the Non-Constituency MP scheme; increasing the number of single-seat wards from nine to 12; and reducing the average size of GRCs.

While the spotlight has largely been on what these proposed changes mean to the opposition, little attention been paid to the other key player: the People's Action Party (PAP).

While few expect any drastic reaction from the PAP, it's clear the party will not be standing still.

First, what would be the impact of the changes on the behaviour of PAP MPs in Parliament? Would the new moves change their style of debate in the House? Would there be a temptation to close ranks as they face the 'cut and thrust' the PM spoke of?

Second, how would the changes affect the PAP's election strategies. How will it tackle the extra single-seat wards? Will the party change its ways of selecting candidates?

### **Debate in the House**

WITH at least nine opposition members joining the next Parliament, it will be the first time in 43 years that the House will have more than four opposition MPs.

Coupled with up to nine Nominated MPs, the ruling Government could face 18 non-PAP members.

Intuitively, a stronger opposing camp is expected to lead to PAP MPs closing ranks and becoming more party-centric.

In effect, it would mean reining in their criticisms.

For years, the PAP MPs have typically worn various hats - policymaker, critic, opposition.

In fact, part of the reason Government Parliamentary Committees were set up in 1987 was for them to act as a form of shadow opposition.

Under the scheme, PAP MPs were divided into groups that focused on looking at policies of specified ministries.

Would the influx of opposition voices now obviate the need for the party to serve as its own check?

Yes, say political observers like Dr Gillian Koh, who expects the PAP party line to become more visible.

Said the senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies: 'Finally they don't have to be their own internal critics. They are able to speak more forcefully about what PAP stands for. Right now, it's a broad church. PAP stance will come into sharper relief.'

Yet, most MPs tell Insight they have no plans to start holding back.

A chorus of criticisms of government policy from the opposition, they say, will not deter them from voicing their own disagreements and concerns.

The culture, they say, is to argue based on facts, and not political expediency. And because they are bringing up concerns they sincerely believe in, rather than to score some sort of political point, the presence of more opposition voices would not change their approach, they add.

Says Senior Parliamentary Secretary Amy Khor (Hong Kah GRC): 'When a PAP MP criticises government policies, he or she is not doing it just for criticism's sake or playing to the gallery.'

'To do so will, of course, incur the wrath of PAP ministers who are known to give as good as they get, or better.'

'It is done with the sincere belief that it would help to improve government policies for the benefit of Singaporeans and these criticisms would reflect the views of residents as well as those of the MP.'

In fact, all agree that it would be a step back for PAP MPs to censor their views just to toe the party line.

While a more confrontational Parliament is almost inevitable with the larger opposition presence, the apolitical, facts-based approach to debating policy must still be a part of it.

Similarly, the Government Parliamentary Committee's (GPC) role as a form of shadow opposition may diminish but its think-tank way of tackling policy must stay, says Senior Parliamentary Secretary Teo Ser Luck (Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC).

'It (GPC) serves the role of looking at policies and issues constructively rather than politically. We will be thinking in terms of national interest, and less about putting things across because of political points,' says Mr Teo.

### **Easier to compare quality**

SINGAPORE Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan argues that any attempt by the party to control its MPs' view would be 'foolish'.

'The PAP MPs are already relatively careful when they criticise the Government. With the changes, some might be less critical. But the PAP will be short-sighted and foolish to stop their MPs from making constructive criticisms of the Government.'

He adds: 'In fact, if PAP MPs scale back on playing a constructive role in Parliament, they will be perceived to be ineffective legislators and this will not go down well with voters.'

The challenge, therefore, will not be how to counter the opposing camp, but to prove they are 'qualitatively different' from the opposition MPs, NCMPs and NMPs.

Says Mr Tan: 'With more non-PAP MPs, there will be even more opportunities for comparisons.'

It is a comparison which works both ways. The opposition will also have to raise their game.

Says Mr Hri Kumar Nair (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC): 'There will be more pressure on the opposition to perform. Now, they can say they are overshadowed.'

'But with nine, technically they have a stronger presence and it is down to them to step up and show they can do a better job.'

Mr Nair is puzzled by the complaint of some opposition members that the move to guarantee more opposition voices will discourage people from voting for the opposition.

'It's a strange argument. Even if you are coming in as a NCMP, it is a chance to make your mark in Parliament and show voters what you can do. Why are they afraid of this change?'

As for veteran MP Charles Chong (Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC), he feels PAP MPs would not start to close ranks, simply because there would be no real need to.

If nine opposition members get into Parliament, it still would not present a big threat.

While he hopes Singapore's Parliament will never descend into an 'us-against-them' situation - where everybody takes a side regardless of his personal opinion - he doubts PAP MPs will be reined in unless the gap between the number of MPs on both sides is very narrow.

'(The Government) can afford to take a relaxed view and we can still have a diversity of views in the party,' he says.

Currently, MPs can say whatever they want, he adds. The party whip - which makes sure members toe the party line - applies only during voting.

But even if PAP MPs have no intention of changing their ways, the sparring between them and the larger opposition camp will intensify.

More off-the-cuff speeches, more debate and a generally livelier House are in the offing.

Mr Chong, a five-term MP, notes that in the current configuration, there are occasional sittings where debates involve 'one intellectual speech after another'.

'It bores the heartlanders to death. Soon, there will be more sound and fury,' he says, with a laugh.

Which may be just as well, because everyone agrees that with more opposition in the House, Parliament sittings will get longer.

### **Election strategy**

BUT even before the MPs get to spar in Parliament, the impact of the changes will be felt at the starting gate of elections.

Smaller GRCs, more single-seat wards - these will affect the way the PAP strategises, recruits and plans for battle.

One thing is certain: general elections are slated to become more exciting. With the lower entry barriers, observers and PAP MPs expect more of a contest.

With smaller GRCs - with no more than five members on average, down from the current 5.4, opposition parties will find it slightly easier to cobble together teams.

At the same time, there will be more single-seat wards - up from nine to at least 12 - which are deemed to give the opposition a better chance, given they are one-on-one fights.

Says Dr Koh: 'Gone are the days when the opposition can say there are so few opportunities. No longer would that excuse be there.'

What this in turn means for the PAP: more pressure.

As Joo Chiat MP Chan Soo Sen puts it: 'When you have smaller GRCs and a larger number of SMCs (single-member constituency), you can be quite sure there will be more contests.'

'So we need to make sure we're operationally more ready to fight to win the ground. The people manning the party election mechanisms will have to be even more on their toes.'

Specifically, the PAP can be counted on to consider even more carefully who it will put in the 12 single-seat wards.

For these, a contest is virtually guaranteed. At the same time, they cannot depend on fellow GRC MPs to help them out.

Says Nee Soon Central MP Ong Ah Heng: 'When you're in a single-seat ward, you have to be prepared to spend more time and be prepared to work.'

Adds Mr Chan: 'For single-seat wards, you feel much more committed to what you have to do. Because if you do well, it's yours. If you do badly, it's also yours. You cannot benefit from the glory of your fellow GRC colleagues.'

Thus, traditionally speaking, the PAP has always fielded in these wards candidates with strong track records and are deemed to be able to hold the ground.

In the years following 1988 when GRCs were introduced, the PAP has never fielded a first-term MP to defend single seat wards it held. New candidates were fielded in SMCs only if an opposition MP was incumbent there.

### **Likely single-seat candidates?**

ONE hypothesis is the party may now be willing to be bolder and parachute rookies into single-seat wards to test them - given that one motive for the political liberalisation is to address younger voters' desire for more opposition.

After all, better to lose a couple of single-seat wards than a GRC, so the reasoning goes.

Says Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Inderjit Singh: 'It is a good idea - over the long term - to field first-term MPs and let them have the experience of fighting hard to win.'

'The party might be willing (to experiment with this)...Maybe out of the 12, we field two or three newcomers, so that we don't take too big a risk!'

Adds Mr Chan: 'It is conceivable that they will field a first-term candidate, but one who has been a veteran activist - such as a branch secretary.'

And if not newcomers, one hope is the PAP will at least take the step of fielding women and minority race candidates.

Says Dr Eugene Tan: 'I hope Singapore can debunk the myth that newcomers, minorities, and women fielded by the PAP will not fare well in SMCs.'

But these will be the exception, say those interviewed.

Says Mr Nair, a first-term MP: 'I can see merit in not putting new candidates in single-seat wards. It is perceived to be a tougher fight, no one, no political party ever goes into a fight with one arm tied behind its back. When you go in, you have to put your best man there to give you your highest chance of winning. That's only sensible.'

Mr Tan agrees: 'Yes, the PAP will be bolder but they will not be reckless. They contest to win. Besides, they would want to show that they can do equally well, if not better, in SMCs as in GRCs.'

Given this, single-seat candidates have to be 'reasonably prominent and well-liked' and possess inter-ethnic appeal, as Mr Tan puts it.

This may be fulfilled in two ways.

One, they need to have 'tremendous amount of grassroots experience', says Mr Chan.

Potential names range from fifth-term MP Charles Chong and three-term MP Inderjit Singh, known for their outspokenness in Parliament, to popular labour MP Halimah Yacob, who is in her third term, and first-term MP Sam Tan, who is well-established in the grassroots.

Asked about this possibility, Mr Singh says: 'I am but a soldier. I will go where the PM asks me to.'

'I'll be confident (if fielded), as I do have strong support on the ground.'

Alternatively, the party may decide to field those of 'ministerial calibre', like a minister of state, 'and the voters will be urged to think at the national level', adds Mr Tan.

This category may include the likes of Minister of State Heng Chee How, and younger counterparts such as Senior Parliamentary Secretary Teo Ser Luck, and Minister of State Lee Yi Shyan.

At the same time, the pool of suitable candidates further shrinks when one takes into consideration their day jobs.

By chance or design, the current slate of seven PAP MPs in single-seat wards work either in the Government, government-linked companies (GLCs) or the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC).

The fact is, these employers do tend to be more understanding than private-sector companies when MPs have to take time out for their political obligations, observes Mr Ong, who has retired from the NTUC.

On another front, the impact of the changes on GRCs will also be felt but perhaps to a lesser degree.

At present, there are 14 GRCs, comprising five six-member GRCs and nine five-member GRCs.

Future permutations may see, for instance, the emergence of two six-member GRCs, eight five-member GRCs and five four-member GRCs.

With smaller GRCs, it will be easier for the opposition to get four members rather than six, say those interviewed.

How can the PAP fight back?

One aspect of its strategy may need to change, says Mr Singh. 'I think we cannot send candidates to the ground at the last minute any more.

'Our strategy must change, we must not be afraid to identify someone as a potential candidate, and help him know the ground immediately,' he adds.

At the same time, with a greater premium placed on candidates with the ability and aptitude to fight electoral battles, will the rate of turnover in the PAP slow down?

In most elections, the party deliberately retires about one-third - about 25 - of its MPs to inject new blood into its ranks.

Many are seasoned politicians who are clear assets in electioneering - whether in single-seat wards or smaller GRCs.

It is thus possible that a new element would be injected into this calculation of who stays and who goes.

But Mr Ong, 65, a third-term MP who has made it clear he wants to retire by the next election, believes it would not fundamentally shift the party's policy of self-renewal.

'This is something the PAP has committed to,' he says.

Ultimately, tweaks aside, MPs and observers do not see any significant change in the PAP's electoral strategy.

Says Mr Tan: 'The PAP will adjust to the changes from a position of strength. It has the best party machinery and it is well-tested.

'Besides, it will have the strategic advantage of being the outgoing government when Parliament is dissolved.'