

## **GRCs here to stay, but will be fewer and smaller: PM Lee Hsien Loong**

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There will be fewer Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) in the next general election and, on average, they will be smaller.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong promised yesterday that he would instruct the committee that reviews the electoral boundaries before an election to further reduce the average size of GRCs. It will also be told to create more single-member constituencies (SMCs).

Mr Lee, however, did not give any details in his parliamentary speech yesterday when he outlined changes to the political system that were first mentioned in the President's Address.

GRCs require candidates to contest in teams with at least one member from a minority race.

Introduced in 1988, it remains a pillar of the Singapore political system, Mr Lee said.

"We have all the world's major religions in Singapore, and race and religion will always be fundamental tectonic fault lines for us. If we ever split along one of these fault lines, that's the end of us."

The size of GRCs has been steadily reduced, on average, from 5.4, following complaints that large ones make it even harder for opposition parties to field the required candidates for a team. The size, on average, has dipped from five in 2011 to 4.75 at last year's polls.

The number of SMCs now stands at 13, one more than in 2011.

Calls have been made recently for a return to a system with only single-seat constituencies. But Mr Lee said: "The GRC system is a good one and I think we should keep it."

It ensures a minimum number of minority race MPs, requiring political parties to give weight to the interests of minorities, he said.

"Opposition parties know they have to win support from the minorities and that they have to field credible Malay and Indian candidates in their teams, and they make quite a big effort to go and do that.

"It puts pressure on us in the PAP, but I think it's a right system that the opposition parties have to make that effort in order to put up a credible team."

With GRCs, parties that play racial politics during elections do so at the expense of votes from other racial groups.

Still, it has not stopped candidates "from being naughty from time to time", Mr Lee said.

Citing the last polls, he said some opposition candidates tried to win Malay votes by "ostentatiously performing prayers in public before election rallies and posting photos of themselves doing so on social media". He did not name names.

Another big plus of the GRC scheme is that it provides a platform to assess MPs' ability in running a town council and, in turn, the Government, said Mr Lee.

If a party can run a town council, "that's a base from which it can build and persuade Singaporeans". "If it can't, it's just as well that Singaporeans know this early and everybody is under no illusion," he said.

Still, there was a need to balance big and small GRCs, as well as GRCs and single-seat constituencies, Mr Lee said, adding that there were "pluses and minuses both ways".

A bigger GRC benefits from having a minister lead in the management of its affairs, and better economies of scale in running the town council and constituency-wide activities, while a smaller GRC allows for closer connections between MPs and their residents.

Mr Lee said: "SMCs have their place in our system too because they are not just easier to contest, but also give an MP direct responsibility for everything that happens in his constituency."

Analysts interviewed said the changes announced were a step in the right direction.

Said Institute of Policy Studies deputy director for research Gillian Koh: "Minorities comprise a quarter of the population. Having four-member GRCs in which one is a minority makes it more representative."

"An average that brings us closer to this is good."

Professor Bilveer Singh of the National University of Singapore said it was equally important to cut the total number of GRCs and have more SMCs. "Some people will continue to believe a GRC is for weak candidates to hang onto the coat-tails of senior guys," he said.

Reducing its number is in the ruling party's interest as it has "to produce good people for the future and legacy of the country".