

Changes to political system: NCMP scheme; More opposition from next Parliament for more robust debate

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The Straits Times, 28 January 2016

Singapore's Parliament will have at least 12 opposition MPs after the next general election, up from the current nine, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said yesterday.

They will include Non-Constituency MPs (NCMPs). The proposed increase is to foster even more robust debate and open contest of ideas in the House. The NCMPs are also to be given equal voting power in Parliament as their elected peers.

To allow for this, Mr Lee said he intends to amend the Constitution during this term.

These changes "will in effect aid the opposition, giving their best losers more exposure and very possibly building them up for the next general election", Mr Lee said.

"But I believe that in this phase of our political development, this is good for the Government, good for Singapore. No ruling party or government must ever be afraid of open argument.

"The PAP never has been and ultimately, Singapore will benefit from a contest of ideas in the House," he said.

The NCMP scheme was introduced in 1984 to ensure opposition presence in Parliament. Seats are offered to the best performers among the opposition losers at a general election.

While NCMPs do not represent any constituency, they can speak at parliamentary debates or file motions for debate, like an elected MP.

But currently, they are not allowed to vote on five matters: constitutional changes, supply Bills on government spending, money Bills that deal with issues like taxation, votes of confidence, and motions to remove the President from office.

The number of NCMPs in each term of Parliament also depends on how many opposition MPs had been elected. The current limit is nine, so even if the ruling party wins all the seats in an election, there will still be opposition members.

And the Government "will still have to argue for and defend its policies robustly", Mr Lee said.

He also felt it was reasonable to raise the number to 12.

"Given that in any election, at least 30 per cent of voters will vote against the Government, ensuring a minimum of 12 opposition MPs in the House of about 100 members I feel is reasonable."

Together with the nine Nominated MPs who are appointed to represent the various voices from civil society, there will be at least 21 MPs who are not from the ruling party, Mr Lee said.

He dismissed as "excuses" the opposition contention that they could not put up a stronger performance in Parliament because there are too few of them.

"The opposition's impact depends on the quality of the opposition MPs and arguments, far more than on their number," he said.

"Having more NCMPs will give the opposition more opportunities to show what they can do. And if in fact the NCMPs are capable and effective, the exposure will win them recognition and help them win a constituency the next time."

He cited Workers' Party (WP) chairman Sylvia Lim, who entered Parliament in 2006 as an NCMP.

"She impressed voters and became an MP, elected in Aljunied GRC in 2011."

Giving NCMPs equal voting rights will also quell perceptions that they are "second-class MPs".

He noted that some NCMPs win a higher percentage of votes than do individual MPs in a group representation constituency.

They arguably also have more right to a seat in Parliament than some MPs in countries which adopt the proportional representation system, Mr Lee said.

Under that system, a certain number of MPs get selected by party leaders to be in Parliament, depending on the election results.

"On a party list... no voter specifically chose you. Your party boss put you on the list in position two or three or 20. And you happen to make the cut," he said.

"Here, to be an NCMP, the voters in the constituency where you contested have to have a sufficiently high regard of you to give you one of the highest (percentage of votes) among all losing candidates before you can come (into Parliament).

"You have people who are truly personally voting for you. I think that gives legitimacy as well as objectivity to the system," he said.

Mr Lee also recounted the origins of the NCMP scheme.

The People's Action Party (PAP) dominated Parliament for 16 years from independence after the then main opposition party Barisan Sosialis staged a boycott.

It was only in 1981 that the first opposition member - WP's J. B. Jeyaretam - was elected.

Mr Lee said that then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues had "concluded - to their surprise - that despite all the to-ing and fro-ing and unpleasantness, it was good for the Government".

"The opposition could express opposing views, question and criticise the Government, make ministers justify their actions," he said.

It also "provided Mr Lee and his team the 'foil' or backdrop against which they could set out their ideas more clearly in contrast to what was being presented on the other side - right against wrong, good ideas against better ones", he added.

Most analysts interviewed welcomed the NCMP changes.

National University of Singapore (NUS) political scientist Reuben Wong said they were likely prompted by Singaporeans' increased expectations for debate and a diversity of views in policymaking.

It will in effect "institutionalise" a Parliament with at least two political parties, he said.

But Associate Professor Wong, as well as his NUS colleague, Associate Professor Hussin Mutalib, suggested that critics may say that voters will "have their cake and eat it too" and get used to the idea they can always vote for the PAP and still have opposition in Parliament.

Institute of Policy Studies deputy director for research Gillian Koh said the changes were a "great gift to the opposition" but Mr Lee may find it an uphill task convincing his own party's MPs of their merits.