

MPs, analysts offer ideas on how political system can be changed

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The Straits Times, 17 January 2016

Suggestions include making GRCs smaller, raising bar of entry for presidential candidates

It may be early days yet, but President Tony Tan Keng Yam's revelation that the Government will study Singapore's political system for possible reforms has drawn suggestions from different fronts.

The Sunday Times spoke to analysts and MPs, who offered a host of ideas on how various schemes, such as for the elected president and Non-Constituency MP (NCMP), can be improved.

The plan to review the political system was announced in Dr Tan's address on Friday at the opening of Parliament. In setting out the Government's road map for its new term, he said the political system had worked well for the country, but should be refreshed as circumstances change so Singaporeans "can be assured of clean, effective and accountable government over the long term".

It will be in the spirit of keeping the system relevant that the study will be done, said Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim. Speaking on the sidelines of a community event yesterday, he said the previous modifications "ensure our political system remains fair, balanced and just, to allow more parties to participate". [Related Story](#)

Government to study if political system needs tweaking

In a Facebook update on the opening of Parliament, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said he will speak at the debate next week on the President's speech. The Sunday Times understands he will speak about the Government's priorities in this term, as well as longer-term issues, including building a political system that will foster stability and good government for Singapore.

President Tan said various "innovations" over the years, such as the NCMP and Nominated MP schemes, and Group Representation Constituency scheme, had allowed alternative views to be aired, and ensured minority communities are not shut out.

The elected president's office had also fostered stability in the system, by giving a "second key" to the president, who has specific custodial powers over the reserves and important public sector appointments.

Analysts said recent discussion in the press about the elected president could signal changes are afoot.

Institute of Policy Studies senior fellow Gillian Koh suggested that the review could look at how having an election politicises the office.

Former Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Inderjit Singh said the political overtones could result in a "wrong person" being elected president and impeding the work of a good government.

Mayor of Central Singapore District and Jalan Besar GRC MP Denise Phua said yesterday: "Review the need to spend resources running (a presidential election) which further politicises and divides our country every six years, sometimes soon after a general election."

Given the custodial powers vested in the president, another area to review is the suitability of candidates, said some analysts.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser suggested tweaks to ensure the person elected has held positions of great responsibilities, is of high stature, is well-reputed, and has contributed significantly to Singapore.

His view was shared by political scientist Derek da Cunha, who wrote in a Facebook note on Friday that the Government should "raise the bar of entry to candidates".

Some others, like Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC MP Alex Yam, suggested that the GRC system, put in place in 1988 to ensure minority representation in Parliament, can be tweaked to make the constituencies smaller.

Ms Phua felt the NCMP scheme, which offers parliamentary seats to the best-performing losing opposition candidates, should be done away with as voters "can vote political leaders in and they know they can vote them out too when they do not perform".

Professor Tan, though, felt there could be an increase in the proportion of NCMPs and NMPs, given voters' desire for more political diversity. No matter the changes, said Mr Yam, there should be an open conversation between Singaporeans and the Government.

Former NMP and Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said the review is timely, coming on the back of the ruling People's Action Party's 69.9 per cent win in September's General Election. He said it signals the Government's acknowledgement of greater desire for more democratic opportunities: "Notwithstanding the strong mandate, they see it as a good time to engage the people."