

## **Opening of Parliament President's address; Govt to study if political system needs tweaking**

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It has to be refreshed from time to time as country's circumstances change: President

Singapore has renewed its political system over the years to suit the country's circumstances and needs, and the Government will study if further improvements are needed for its long-term benefit, said President Tony Tan Keng Yam yesterday.

He disclosed these plans as he addressed the House about the importance of having good politics so that good policies can succeed.

Making a distinction between the two, Dr Tan said good politics hinges on people electing governments that develop and deliver on sound policies that will strengthen the country and bring unity.

Good policies, on the other hand, ensure all citizens benefit from the country's success, he added.

"This was how, for 50 years, we conceived and implemented sound policies to improve the lives of people. We had good politics because our policies benefited everyone; and we had good policies because our politics expanded our common spaces," he said.

Dr Tan urged the Government to ensure politics continues to work for the long-term good of Singapore.

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Thus far, he said, Singapore's political system "discourages narrow interest-based politics and encourages clear electoral outcomes", and has served the country well.

To ensure this continues, he added, the political system must let the Government govern effectively, so Singapore does not go down the road of countries "suffering from deep divisions in their societies, and crippled by political gridlock".

The political system must also incorporate checks and balances, allow alternative views to be taken into account, and ensure minority communities are not shut out or marginalised, he said.

This is the reason Singapore's first-past-the-post electoral system had been modified over the years to suit the country's circumstances and needs, he said.

For instance, in 1984, Non-Constituency MPs were introduced to ensure those who did not vote for the governing party would have their views heard in Parliament.

Nominated MPs were brought into the House in 1990 to offer non-partisan voices, while group representation constituencies were introduced to guarantee Parliament has at least a minimum number of minority MPs.

Dr Tan also pointed to the elected president, instituted in 1991, as a "critical element" in the political system. While executive powers are vested in the Government, the president holds a "second key" and has specific custodial powers over the spending of reserves and important public sector appointments.

Taken together, these innovations have delivered stability and progress for Singapore, but the system has to be refreshed from time to time as the country's circumstances change, said Dr Tan.

"The Government will study this matter carefully, to see whether and how we should improve our political system so that we can be assured of clean, effective and accountable government over the long term."

Equally important to ensuring good politics, he said, is having a capable and honest political leadership. On this count, the Government has to take leadership renewal seriously and "consciously and systematically" nurture every generation of leaders. The new leaders must then "win anew the people's trust, for the right to leadership is not transferable from one generation to the next".

"Our system must make it an imperative for every politician to be honest and trusted, and to do the right thing for Singapore and Singaporeans," he added.

Analysts said it could be a signal that tweaks may be made to the parliamentary system.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said it is an acknowledgement of Singaporeans' growing desire for greater political diversity in Parliament.

As for the elected president, Professor Tan and former People's Action Party MP Inderjit Singh felt it was unlikely for changes to be made before the next presidential election, which must be held by August next year. Doing so could be seen as the Government trying to influence the outcome.

Changes made now may seem as if the Government is trying to influence the outcome in favour of its preferred candidate, or avoid a repeat of the close fight in 2011, they said.

Mr Singh, however, said the office was in need of a review because it had become "a proxy for party politics".

"In the last presidential election, it was quite clear the feelings from the 2011 GE continued to be played out," he said.

Similarly, Institute of Policy Studies senior fellow Gillian Koh said that having an election may already be politicising the office.

The fact that the president is elected could "give voters and the candidates the idea that the president has all the powers of, say, a Member of Parliament or even a prime minister in terms of that 'political mandate' ", which is not the case, she added.

President Tony Tan Keng Yam opening the first session of the 13th Parliament, flanked by Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon and Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob.