

Politics to take a back seat?

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Twice in four years, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced political reforms during the National Day Rally.

In his maiden rally speech in 2004, he said organisers of indoor talks would no longer need to apply for a police permit.

Neither is a licence necessary for holding performances or exhibitions at the Speakers' Corner in Hong Lim Park.

Last year, PM Lee announced even more significant changes.

The total ban on party political films was lifted, and for the first time, outdoor protests could be held at the Speakers' Corner.

From his first rally to his most recent one, the Prime Minister has slowly but surely opened up Singapore's political space.

Will tomorrow's rally see a further expansion?

This time, however, major changes to the political system were announced ahead of the rally.

In May, PM Lee unveiled four key changes to ensure more opposition voices in Parliament: The Nominated MP scheme would be entrenched, the average size of GRCs would be reduced, the number of single-seat wards would be increased and the guaranteed number of opposition MPs would be raised.

These were substantial changes. Would it mean political policy changes would take a back seat at this year's rally?

Nanyang Technological University political scientist Ho Khai Leong believes so.

'I'm not very sure if political reforms are on top of the Prime Minister's list of concerns right now.

'My suspicion is that it ranks quite low. If he mentions anything about political reforms during the speech, I will be quite surprised,' he says.

But that is not to say politics will be absent altogether in PM Lee's speech.

Mr Eugene Tan, a law professor from the Singapore Management University, says: 'Politics is always a salient theme of the rally since how the Government governs and why it governs the way it does are all integral to politics here.

'At the very least, he will throw up issues for the nation's discussion and reflection.'

One issue he foresees is the perennial problem of political renewal. With speculation of a general election (GE) rearing its head this year, the rally may be a good time to talk about renewal again.

'The so-called search for the next PM to be fielded in the next GE will provide the platform for the PM to encourage young Singaporeans to seriously consider public service through politics,' says Mr Tan.

With the country celebrating the 50th anniversary of its self-government this year, PM Lee may also use part of his speech to commemorate the landmark event, adds Mr Tan.

'PM Lee would reflect on how far we have come in the last half-century. He probably may point out that we succeeded by doing things our way, and that we should not chart our progress against Western paradigms.

'The need to assert that Singapore needs to have a system of governance that works, unfettered by Western models and expectations, will be underlined.'

And if political reforms do make their way into the speech, analysts feel it would likely be used as a platform to move the plot forward.

Noting the significant tweaks that have taken place since the last rally, Dr **Gillian Koh** of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy says: 'Perhaps these bear reiterating - there is change and how will people appropriate the new space, recognising at the same time that there are others who want more?'

'It might be a good occasion for the PM to tie these all up to reiterate his grand vision and step towards that.'