

## **Electoral boundaries panel tasked to look into having smaller GRCs; Committee set up two months ago, an indication that elections are approaching**

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Often seen as a tell-tale sign that elections are around the corner, the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee has been set up two months ago, and changes to the demarcation of the wards could be afoot, with the average size of the Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) to be reduced further to fewer than five members, under guidelines set by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

The committee, chaired by Mr Tan Kee Yong, the Secretary to Prime Minister, will also consider the population shifts and housing developments since the last boundary delineation exercise, and maintain the minimum number of Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) at 12.

“It is now in the midst of its deliberations and will make its recommendations to me when it is ready,” Mr Lee told Parliament yesterday.

He was responding to questions filed by West Coast GRC Member of Parliament (MP) Arthur Fong and Non-Constituency MP Yee Jenn Jong, who had asked whether the committee has been formed and what its guidelines are, among other questions.

In the 2011 General Election (GE), there was a total of 12 SMCs and 15 GRCs, with an average size of five members. Before the GE, Mr Lee had given directions that the minimum number of SMCs be increased from nine to 12, and the average GRC size reduced from 5.4 members to five.

Currently, there are two GRCs that have four members: Holland-Bukit Timah GRC and Moulmein-Kallang GRC. Another two have six members (Ang Mo Kio GRC and Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC), while the rest have five members.

For the previous two GEs, in 2006 and 2011, the electoral boundaries review committee took about four months each to complete its work and submit a report to the Prime Minister. The time between the release of the committee’s report to the issuance of the writ of election has ranged from one day to one month and 26 days.

While political pundits expect the GE to be called as early as September, Mr Lee played his cards close to his chest when he was asked by Mr Yee if he was prepared to commit to a minimum duration of, say, six months between the publishing of the boundaries report and the calling of elections.

Mr Lee responded that he did not think it was possible to stipulate a certain minimum period. “(It) depends very much on the exigencies of the situation and ... on when elections become necessary,” he said. Nevertheless, he added, he would make sure that there is enough time in between, “to the maximum extent possible”.

Mr Yee also proposed that, in future, the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee involve non-government representatives, including those from the various political parties.

Mr Lee replied that for many years, the committee has comprised civil servants who have the “domain knowledge” to decide how to carve out the constituencies while making sure there is no “complete upheaval” during each exercise. He added that if there is a need for external expertise, it can be considered.

However, Mr Lee rejected the idea of involving members of political parties. He noted that in the United States, members of the House of Representatives decide on the demarcation of constituencies. “It’s a political deal, I think that’s not a good arrangement ... it’s best we leave this to the civil servants,” said Mr Lee.

To Mr Yee’s suggestion that the minutes of the committee’s deliberations be published, Mr Lee said he did not feel that it would be helpful to have “every twist and turn in the minutes reported and published”.

Political analysts said they expect significant redrawing of the electoral boundaries, as the committee looks to cut the size of GRCs. For the 2011 GE, 11 new constituencies were carved out following the redrawing of the boundaries, while seven were consigned to the history books. The number of Parliamentary seats was bumped to 87, with an additional three seats — the highest increase in almost three decades — up for grabs.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan felt the changes this time could be on an even larger scale. With smaller GRCs, it would mean lower barriers of entry for Opposition parties and, as a result, there could be more multi-cornered fights, he said.

“Fewer candidates, on average, will be needed to form a team,” he added. For the People’s Action Party (PAP), there could also be “relative comfort” that the loss of any GRC would be less significant, he noted.

With the report possibly ready within a few weeks, Associate Professor Tan said Opposition parties would have little time to react to any changes in the boundaries if the GE is held in September.

Still, Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow **Gillian Koh** said the serious Opposition parties would not be affected to a large extent by any changes to the boundaries.

“One would think that their electoral strategies would have broadened so as not to be done in by the changes ... They would have to nurture the ground in general regions, (rather) than in precise and existing polling districts,” she said.