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More opposition spots in Parliament

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Among them: The minimum number of opposition MPs in Parliament, including Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMPs), will be increased from three to nine.

A new group, one consisting of young activists, will also be invited to put forward candidates as Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs).

The changes mean that Parliament will see more faces - both the unpopular and the unknown - for greater inclusion and democracy. (See report below).

In explaining his decisions, PM Lee praised the NCMP scheme, saying it has achieved its purpose and become accepted by the public since it was introduced in 1984.

It complements the Parliamentary Elections Act, which prescribes a minimum of three opposition members in Parliament.

If, in any election, there are fewer than three opposition candidates elected into Parliament, the losing opposition candidates who poll the highest percentage of votes will be declared NCMPs. This will make up the difference, ensuring that there will be three opposition politicians in Parliament anyway.

The latest change will mean that, instead of three, there will be a guaranteed nine opposition members - either directly elected or NCMPs.

This will require an amendment in the Constitution to change the maximum number of NCMPs that Parliament can legislate from six to nine, just in case there are no elected opposition politicians.

To illustrate his point, PM Lee used the results of the 2006 general elections.

In addition to the two elected opposition MPs (Mr Chiam See Tong and Mr Low Thia Khiang), seven other opposition politicians, mostly from the Workers' Party (WP), would have come in as NCMPs.

There would be two from Aljunied GRC (Ms Sylvia Lim and another WP candidate), one from Chua Chu Kang (Mr Steve Chia from the Singapore Democratic Alliance), two from East Coast

GRC (WP), one from Joo Chiat (Dr Tan Bin Seng of WP), and one from Nee Soon Central (Mr Lian Chin Way of WP).

The changes, however, come with a caveat: No more than two NCMPs can come from the same GRC.

More representative

PM Lee said that this will make NCMPs more representative of those who have voted for the opposition nationwide, and clearly distinguish between winning and losing teams in a GRC. He said there should not be an outcome where the entire losing team enters Parliament as NCMPs, and enjoys almost equal status as the winners.

The changes earned praise from some of the PAP's opponents and neutral observers.

Said Mr Steve Chia, a former NCMP: 'It is a step in the right direction towards the democratisation of Singapore and the building of a more robust political system.'

Mr Lee Yoong Yoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said: 'Quantity doesn't mean quality, but it is a sign of maturity that the ruling party is listening to what the public wants.'

'After all, it is not the ruling party's responsibility to help the opposition.'