

Move to give NCMPs full voting rights is 'controversial': analysts

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The move to give Non-constituency Members of Parliament (NCMPs) full voting rights is controversial as questions will be asked about their legitimacy to have such powers without having electoral mandate, said political analysts.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told Parliament on Wednesday (27 Jan) that the Constitution will be amended to give NCMPs the same voting rights as constituency MPs. This means they will be able to vote on matters such as constitutional changes and votes of no confidence in the Government, and removing a President from office.

Senior Fellow at Institute of Policy Studies Gillian Koh said the changes to the NCMP system are "contentious".

A key point of discussion would be about future NCMPs having the same voting rights as elected MPs but without having the responsibility of attending to the needs of citizens in various constituencies, she added.

"Where does the authority (of NCMPs) spring from?...The way it is set up now, you are really runners-up with runners-up powers, and not runners-up and you get the powers of winners," said Koh.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan agreed, saying that the changes are "controversial" and will be questioned by the ruling party's backbenchers.

"You are giving NCMPs the same voting rights as elected MPs and that goes against fundamental democratic principles of representation and accountability. It is not so clear who the NCMPs are accountable to," said Tan.

Among Singaporean voters, Tan pointed out that they would prefer opposition MPs who have the proper electoral mandate. As such, they would question whether NCMPs have earned the right to have such voting powers.

"The whole intent is to give NCMPs 'teeth'. They now can bark but they have no bite. By giving them the full voting rights, you are saying 'Look, we are giving you the bark and bite'. I'm not sure if people are going to be persuaded," said Tan.

Meanwhile, the minimum number of opposition Members of Parliament, including NCMPs, will be increased from nine to 12 in the next general elections.

Lee said that the presence of NCMPs ensures that opposition voices are always adequately represented in Parliament. With the coming changes, he added, "There will be no reason at all to perceive NCMPs as second-class."

The NMP scheme will be maintained and together with the NCMPs, there will be at least 21 non-ruling party MPs in the House.

Koh believed that the prime minister's proposal to have greater opposition representation in Parliament is in line with his desire to ensure that Singapore's political system stays relevant and viable.

"The PM believes that there is merit in having more alternative voices with some powers to back them. His view is that it is important to have an opposition to keep the front bench, the ruling party accountable. He is thinking long term," said Koh.

Lee also addressed the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) scheme, which was introduced in 1988 to ensure a minimum number of minority race MPs in Parliament.

Noting that smaller GRCs and more Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) were created for the last two elections, Lee said that when he appoints the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee for the next GE, he will instruct it to reduce the average size of GRCs further, and to create more SMCs.