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### Changes may mean slaying sacred cows

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COMMENTARY

# Changes may mean slaying sacred cows



EUGENE K B TAN

We are now a significant step closer to the 12th General Election with the Government's acceptance of the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee's (EBRC) report.

The timing of the report's release is noteworthy. In the last GE, there was an interval of about half a month between the Prime Minister receiving the report and its release. This time, it was three days. This timely release of the EBRC's report is to be welcomed.

Like its predecessors, the latest report merely states the committee's recommendations. It did not delve substantively into the rationale and principles guiding its decisions other than the rule allowing a 30-per-cent variance in the ratio of electors per MP.

On what basis did the EBRC

decide to retain the two SMCs besides the Opposition-held Potong Pasir and Hougang? Why did it abolish the other five SMCs? How did it decide which GRCs should become smaller? The EBRC missed a valuable opportunity to shed light on its method. Not surprisingly, this has already given rise to talk of gerrymandering, and of how the changes tend to benefit the ruling party.

To be fair, the recommendations did seek to advance the principle of fair and balanced representation. In tandem with the population's increase over the last decade, the EBRC recommended 87 seats in Parliament, up from 84 which was the number introduced in 2001. The EBRC also sought to ensure the number of electors in similar-sized GRCs did not have too much variation.

Nonetheless, if the EBRC better articulated its reasoning and justification for its

recommendations, it would go a long way to enhancing the buy-in to this crucial aspect of the electoral process. As I argued in a commentary last year, the process by which boundaries are reviewed is just as important as the specific changes themselves – notwithstanding the reality that the redrawing of electoral boundaries is in any case perceived to be inherently political, and that it is probably impossible to have perfectly distributed electoral divisions.

The publication of the EBRC report means that the various political parties must now shift their preparations for the hustings into a higher gear. For the Opposition parties, the first urgent need is to work swiftly towards an agreement on which ward each party will contest. The sooner the parties know, the sooner they can engage the voters.

This is easier said than done since the stakes are higher this time. With nine places in Parliament assured for the Opposition – whether by dint of an outright electoral win or Non-Constituency MP seats for the best-performing losers – parties will be gunning for the

seats they perceive to offer the best prospects. The recent further splintering of the Opposition, however, poses formidable challenges to their unity.

For the PAP, the changes may mean having to slay some electoral sacred cows.

One example is its reluctance to field a female candidate in an SMC. Of the 12 single seats drawn up for the next GE, two currently have female MPs – Dr Amy Khor in Hong Kah North and Ms Grace Fu in Yuhua. If the PAP retains the incumbents in these two SMCs, then we will see the PAP fielding women candidates in single-seat wards for the first time since 1991.

Will it also field a rookie candidate in a SMC? It has never done so since 1988 when all new candidates were fielded only in GRCs.

It is likely the Prime Minister will not dissolve Parliament until May. All political parties will need time to digest the report and determine a suitable electoral strategy. For the Opposition, that also means coming to a united stand on an overarching strategy to counter the PAP election machinery and the advantages that come with being an incumbent in

82 out of the current 84 seats.

The wise course would be to avoid three-cornered fights since one is sure to split the non-PAP vote. And will the Opposition lock down the three PAP big guns – Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew – by contesting on their home turfs?

The next GE will be a watershed in several respects. It takes place against the backdrop of the largest proportion of post-1965 voters yet, an unprecedented (if uncertain) role for new/social media in how parties and voters reach out to each other, and the expectation that next political leadership team – including the next Prime Minister – will emerge from these polls.

Excitement is building up, and now that the lines of the battlefield have been made known, it is up to the parties to reveal where exactly – and how – they will take the fight to the ground. ■

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