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Prioritising strong and effective government

Future tweaks to electoral system should promote deeper political representation, substantive participation



EUGENE K B TAN

For our laws and national policies to retain their legitimacy, Parliament, as the ultimate law-making institution, has to be the key platform for the articulation and debate of diverse views.

The amendments to the Constitution and the related legislation passed earlier this week are part of the endeavour to retain Parliament's standing as the focal point of our political life and governance.

These changes are in sync with the Government's efforts to develop a system of parliamentary democracy that it deems best for Singapore.

They also seek to keep our brand of parliamentary democracy relevant and legitimate even in our one party-dominant political system. Without a doubt, the changes also reinforce the centrality of strong and effective government.

Yet, representation is a foundational idea of political life since ancient times. Indeed, the changes seek to enhance Parliament's representativeness. True and purposeful representation clothes political action with legitimacy and catalyses political participation.

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has won, on average, 66 per cent of the popular vote in the six general elections since 1984 when the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) scheme was introduced.

Under our "first-past-the-post" electoral system, whether a political party wins by a single ballot or 99.9 per cent of the votes, the winner takes it all.

As such, two-thirds of the national popular vote have given the PAP at least 95 per cent of parliamentary seats since 1984. The NCMP scheme was conceived to ensure a minimum, if not nominal, representation of opposition parliamentarians.

But the emphasis has shifted to alternative and diverse views in Parliament, rather than adversarial, partisan ones. Here, the Nominated MP (NMP) scheme, established in 1990, now has its institutionalised niche as an integral part of Parliament.

The Government is acutely aware of the growing desire for a

more open and vibrant political system — one where the citizen's voice matters, and where the concern and interest with national matters is not seen as the sole preserve of politicians.

This politics with a small "p" for the masses is to be distinguished from politics with a big "P", which involves only a select group of citizens partaking in the rough and tumble of adversarial political contests.

Further, there is a need to deal with the perception that parliamentary sittings are PAP party caucuses, wherein Parliament's ability to restrain the powerful executive is doubted.

The constitutional changes also reflect the abiding belief that the institutional design of our political system must produce a government with a clear mandate, demonstrated through a strong parliamentary majority, for it to be able to govern resolutely and decisively in the long-term interests of Singapore.

While some view the changes as conveying a political advantage to the PAP, it is reasonable to say that, at the very least, they do not disadvantage the PAP.

In fact, the changes are necessary to avoid a freak election outcome. This may happen should the desire for non-PAP voices in Parliament — ostensibly to keep the PAP in check — lead some voters to cast their ballots for the Opposition, thinking that many others would vote for the "tried and tested" PAP.

The changes will, in a way, let Singaporeans have their cake and eat it. With the provision for a cooling-off day, Singaporeans are asked, in the Law Minister's words, "to vote thoughtfully in accordance with their own long term interests". Operating in the background is the cognisance that there will be at least 18 non-PAP parliamentarians in future legislatures.

As it stands, the election and appointment of our Members of Parliament suggest that representative democracy is not a prioritised outcome of the electoral system.

The NMPs are not elected representatives; they are selected by a special Select Committee of Parliament. Hence, they lack requisite authenticity and authority to represent any group.

NCMPs can, at least, claim the endorsement of the significant

minority who voted for them.

Unsurprisingly, we are rapidly moving away from the Westminster roots of our system of parliamentary democracy. In political matters, the consistent stand is doing it our way.

The PAP's overwhelming political dominance notwithstanding, the institutional design that flows from our Constitution and laws must be inclusive and representative in tandem with the growing democratic aspirations, while in-

creasing Singaporeans' civic participation and democratic ownership of governmental processes. ■

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