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A closer look at NCMP, Elected Presidency reforms

BY

[EUGENE K B TAN](#)

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The proposed changes to the political system continue the Government's narrative that political reforms ought to enhance Parliament's representativeness and increase Singaporeans' civic participation. They reinforce the Government's abiding belief that the political system must produce a Government with a clear mandate, demonstrated through a strong parliamentary majority, for it to govern resolutely and decisively in the long-term interests of Singapore.

Probably the most controversial proposal is to give Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMPs) the same voting rights as elected MPs. While this is a concession given to the opposition, the People's Action Party (PAP) government is doing so from a position of strength. It suggests that the party is confident that the one-party dominant system will persist for some time.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in proposing the changes, acknowledged that the Government will, in effect, be aiding the opposition, but believes that it will be good for the Government and Singapore in this phase of political evolution to benefit from a contest of ideas in Parliament.

Given that NCMPs do not have the electoral mandate from the voters in the constituencies that they had contested in, issues of democratic accountability are raised in giving what would otherwise be unelected election candidates the right to vote on significant matters such as constitutional amendments, the Budget and Money Bills, motions of no-confidence against the Government and the removal of a President from office.

Who are NCMPs accountable to? Even if the intent is to give NCMPs more teeth, should they be given the full suite of voting powers?

Another proposal is to increase the minimum number of opposition MPs, including NCMPs, from the current nine to 12. Yet, in effecting any change to the NCMP scheme, particularly when NCMPs will have the same voting rights as elected MPs, it is crucial that the voters' desire to elect opposition candidates is

not unduly diluted. This is where voters must appreciate that the NCMP route to Parliament is second best.

NCMPs are likely to exercise their voting rights two or three times a year. But given the PAP's overwhelming dominance in Parliament, these NCMP votes will not make any difference in the final result.

The impact of this change, however, could result in a more fragmented opposition landscape. Opposition parties will tend to gravitate towards constituencies that they believe will give them the best chance of entering Parliament via the NCMP route. While the opposition will still prefer to be properly elected, the NCMP route is not one that opposition parties will give a miss today if it is offered to their losing candidates.

SMALLER GRCs the trend from 2010

The change towards more Single-Member Constituencies (SMCs) and smaller Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) continues the trend started in 2010. Again, incremental change is likely: We might see the average GRC size trimmed to 4.5 seats. The current average is 4.75 seats, down from five in the 2011 General Election. But of the 16 GRCs today, 10 have an average of 5.2 MPs, including two 6-member GRCs.

However, what should also be considered is how the redrawing of electoral boundaries can make for a fairer electoral contest. There is a need to go beyond the generic explanation of population shifts and housing development since the last boundary delineation exercise, and offer more transparency in how constituencies are carved up.

The Prime Minister also announced the establishment of a Constitutional Commission, only the second in our independent history, to consider ensuring that "minorities will have a chance to be elected" President. A mechanism similar to the GRC should be considered, he said, "to ensure that minorities can be periodically elected if we have not had a particular minority as President for some time".

Timing, process of change also important

However, in seeking to attain this objective, how we go about doing so is important. What sort of mechanism could possibly ensure this objective? Any affirmative-action policy in this regard will only undermine the office of the Elected President. It will also severely undercut the meritocratic and multiracial foundation of Singapore.

If a minority gets a leg-up to the highest office, questions will arise as to his political authority, legitimacy, and standing. It has been tritely repeated that Singaporeans tend to vote along racial lines. What evidence is there of this phenomenon? Looking at the latest General Election results, PAP GRC teams helmed by minorities have held their own, with Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam's Jurong GRC team being the best PAP election performer.

If Singaporeans do vote along racial lines, then the more urgent task is to work on getting Singaporeans to shed that behaviour so minority candidates can compete on an even footing with ethnic Chinese candidates.

Another locus of effort would be to reinforce the presidency as an important symbol of national unity. If we succeed, voters are going to consider to what extent a candidate, regardless of the individual's race, will promote national unity among the races. Such a consideration should go into a voter's assessment of a candidate's merit. Efforts should also be made to encourage suitably qualified minorities to step forward and seriously consider running for the presidency.

The eligibility criteria for appointment to the Council of Presidential Advisers (CPA) should also be reviewed in tandem with that of the Elected President. If the CPA's role is to be enhanced in the exercise of the President's custodial powers, then the CPA's capacity to offer robust advice and recommendations must be similarly advanced as well.

Timing is important in bringing into force the changes to the Elected President's office. Concerns that the likely change in eligibility criteria will exclude previous presidential candidates must be duly addressed. Perhaps the change to the eligibility criteria could take place in the subsequent presidential election rather than in 2017.

The impact of the proposed changes on our political system will depend on how the opposition seeks to take advantage of them. If they do use the changes as a platform to raise their profile and show what they can do, then it will be a political opportunity well taken. To be sure, the changes do not disadvantage the PAP but the opposition needs to work closer with each other and avoid becoming more fragmented.

The changes seek to enable the PAP government to manage the pace of political change without being dictated to. The adaptation of political institutions and processes is seen as being necessary for Singapore's political survival and prosperity, but the pressure is on the evolving institutional design to become more inclusive, representative, equitable and fair, in tandem with growing democratic aspirations.

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