

TWEAKS, RATHER THAN MAJOR OVERHAUL, IN UPCOMING REVIEW

Weighing the possible changes to Singapore's political system

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The opening of the 13th Parliament last Friday marks the formal commencement of its five-year term and work, and President Tony Tan Keng Yam broadly set out the Government's goal to keep Singapore safe, renew the economy, foster a more caring society, transform the country's urban landscape, and engage and partner Singaporeans in nation building.

What was striking were his remarks on "good politics and leadership".

Just before he concluded his opening address, Dr Tan said: "... our political system must be refreshed from time to time, as our circumstances change. The Government will study this matter carefully, to see whether and how we should improve our political system so that we can be assured of clean, effective, and accountable government over the long term."

Since independence, Singapore has sought to constitutionally engineer a political system that meets the nation's unique needs and aspirations. Although hewed from the British Westminster parliamentary model,

the design of Singapore's electoral and political system has resulted in its evolution away from the Westminster template of legislators being individually elected to represent their constituents in a single electoral district, and elections based on a single-member constituency.

Innovations during an intense burst of constitutional engineering between 1984 and 1991 saw the creation of the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP; introduced in 1984), the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP; 1990), the Group Representation Constituency (GRC; 1988), and the Elected President (1991) schemes.

To be sure, some critics argue that these are efforts by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) to tilt the political playing field to its advantage and staunch its declining electoral support.

What are the drivers behind the proposed review of Singapore's political system? How have circumstances changed since 2010 when the NCMP and NMP schemes were last enhanced and institutionalised respectively?

Voters born post-independence now form the majority of the electorate. The 13th Parliament's composition is more reflective of this demographic shift than its predecessors. These voters



The Elected President will probably not see any major change save for procedural and administrative matters given that the next presidential election is due by August 2017. PHOTO: JASON GUAH

desire more political diversity, greater political competition, and democratic openness and contestation.

In some respects, they have not only imbibed but also internalised the good governance mantra long promoted by the Government: Good men and women are necessary, but so is a robust system of checks and balances that will enhance our system of government and governance.

But one-party dominance imposes limitations on the PAP's ability to effectively check itself without fear or favour. Voters have also demonstrated in the 2015 General Election (GE) that good governance does not entail voting opposition for opposition's sake.

With a strong, if unexpected, electoral mandate, the PAP Government is well positioned to engage Singaporeans as to whether and how the political system can be improved.

If such a review was on the cards in the last Parliament after the PAP's worst electoral showing in the May 2011 GE, questions would have been raised on its objective.

Nevertheless, expectations on the outcome of the current proposed re-

view will have to be adroitly managed. The review may well result in tweaks rather than a major overhaul or restructuring. The Government's preference has always been for incremental changes in the political sphere.

MEETING SINGAPOREANS' ASPIRATIONS

Given the PAP's continued electoral dominance, the imperative of ensuring and bolstering Parliament's representativeness persists. As such, the NCMP scheme might see an increase in the constitutionally mandated minimum of nine non-ruling party MPs, including NCMPs, in Parliament.

In a similar vein, the NMP scheme could be expanded to provide for more representation from the existing seven functional groups (business and industry, the professions, the labour movement, social and community organisations, media, arts and sports, tertiary education institutions, and civil society). The selection process can be made more robust.

Currently, different functional groups have different processes and rules on nominating applicants for consideration by the Parliament's Special Select Committee.

The abiding concern with ensuring that racial minorities are represented in Parliament must remain a cornerstone of our constitutional system of government. Thus, the GRCs will remain a feature of our constitutional government for some time to come.

Changes to the GRC scheme could entail sharpening the *raison d'être* of multiracialism, and reducing the size of the GRCs. In the 2011 and 2015 GE, the average GRC size was five and 4.75 members respectively. Yet, of sixteen GRCs today, 10 have an average of 5.2 MPs, including two 6-member GRCs.

The Elected President (EP) will probably not see any major change save for procedural and administrative matters given that the next presidential election is due by August 2017. There is unlikely to be enough time to consider, consult, and move major changes lest any hasty actions be misinterpreted as attempts by the Government to influence the electoral outcome.

Instead, we might see the Government embarking on a public education outreach to inform and explain the role and powers of the EP. This is necessary when one recalls that the 2011 presidential election was characterised by candidates and voters having competing and even conflicting visions of the Presidency, which were often at odds with the EP's powers provided for in the Constitution.

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Through the years, the Government's consistent narrative on institutional design and change has portrayed these constitutional innovations as a public interest endeavour to enhance Parliament's representativeness, increase Singaporeans' civic participation and democratic ownership of governmental processes, and prevent a "rogue government" from

taking populist measures that could ruin Singapore.

But, above all, the Government believes that the political system must produce a strong and effective government.

The key challenge in this review pivots on keeping Singapore's parliamentary democracy relevant in a one-party-dominant political system. Intimately connected to this is the

Government's steadfast conviction that the constitutional innovations have worked, as Dr Tan reiterated.

We can be confident that there will be strong public interest in the review of the political system. Hopes will be high that the evolving institutional design will be more inclusive, representative, equitable and fair, in tandem with the growing democratic aspirations of Singaporeans.