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**Headline: With the release of electoral boundaries report, all eyes now on political parties' next moves**

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Now that the Government has accepted the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) report, almost 2.6 million voters will soon head for the polls in Singapore's 13th General Election (GE), one that will take place amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

There will be 93 Members of Parliament (MPs) elected from 31 electoral divisions comprising 14 Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) and 17 Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs).

What can we make of the EBRC report and what does it mean for the political parties and Singapore politics in general?

Compared with the 2015 GE, this is one more SMC, no change in the number of four-member GRCs (six), three more five-member GRCs (from eight to 11), but the current two six-member GRCs will be done away, the first time since it was introduced in 1997.

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The average GRC size is reduced to 4.65 MPs, down from 4.75 in the current Parliament. But the proportion of GRC seats in the next Parliament remains unchanged at about 85 per cent.

To level the electoral playing field, the EBRC could have created more SMCs — perhaps up to a quarter or even a third of all elected seats. This would have still ensured that Parliament would have had adequate minority race representation through the GRC system.

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There should also be smaller GRCs. Under the law, a GRC can have between three and six members. The three-member GRC was only used once — in 1988 when the GRC scheme was first introduced.

The EBRC — comprising the Cabinet Secretary, the chief executives of the Housing and Development Board and the Singapore Land Authority, the Chief Statistician, and the Head of the Elections Department — was constituted in August 2019 and this time was the longest that it sat.

With data on population numbers and housing developments easily available, one wonders why the EBRC took so long to wrap up its work.

Furthermore, its report has a “template feel” to it.

Consistent with previous reports, the EBRC merely stated that boundaries are redrawn “taking into account the current configurations, changes in the number of electors due to population shifts and housing developments” since the last boundary delineation exercise in July 2015.

Unsurprisingly, such a generic explanation does not enlighten us on why the EBRC recommended doing away with the SMCs of Fengshan, Punggol East, and Sengkang West, which saw contests between the People’s Action Party (PAP) and the Workers’ Party (WP).

The WP earned two Non-Constituency Member of Parliament seats from these three contests. In fact, Fengshan was carved out of East Coast GRC for the 2015 election and will now be part of the GRC in the coming election.

Looking ahead, the political parties have ramped up preparations for the GE. Time is of the essence. The opposition landscape is more crowded than it was in 2015 with new parties such as the Progress Singapore Party (PSP).

In the past, the smaller opposition parties (excluding the WP) will meet after the EBRC report to agree on dividing up the seats among them in order to ensure that there are only straight fights.

This does not appear to have taken place yet and PSP’s recent announcement that it will contest 15 constituencies at the next GE could mean that there will be more three-cornered fights than in the past.

For PAP, in tandem with its leadership transition, we can expect the 4G political office-holders to take over the helm in East Coast, Sengkang, Bishan-Toa Payoh, Jalan Besar, and Sembawang GRCs from 3G leaders.

This means that 4G Cabinet Ministers, such as Grace Fu, Desmond Lee, Ng Chee Meng, Indranee Rajah and Josephine Teo are likely to be redeployed to other GRCs.

For the WP, the sole opposition party in Parliament, the big question is whether it will refresh and strengthen its slate in Aljunied GRC.

It will also have to acknowledge voters’ concerns over its handling of the town council, now the subject matter of lawsuits against party leaders Sylvia Lim, Low Thia Khiang, and Pritam Singh.

Mr Pritam, WP’s secretary-general and the least implicated among the three, would likely helm the WP team in Aljunied, the party’s crown jewel.

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Might Mr Low and/or Ms Lim move out of Aljunied?

Mr Low could exchange places with Mr Png Eng Huat, the incumbent MP in Hougang, or he could beef up the slate for the enlarged East Coast GRC, the new Sengkang GRC, or Jalan Besar GRC.

Ms Lim could either move to contest in a GRC or a SMC (Punggol West or Mountbatten). Should they contest and win in a constituency other than Aljunied, they would have also redeemed themselves politically.

The PSP plans to contest in West Coast GRC, which includes the Ayer Rajah ward where its leader Dr Tan Cheng Bock was a PAP MP for more than 25 years (1980 to 2006).

But ever since the West Coast GRC was first created in 1997, the PAP has either been elected unopposed or won with a vote share higher than the PAP's national average.

As it's more than a decade since Dr Tan stood down as MP, his prospects are significantly better in a SMC where his reputation, track record, and campaign experience can help him secure a famous victory.

Dr Tan's challenge in a GRC is to find running mates who can carry their own weight so that the slate is more than the sum of its parts.

With the EBRC report's release, we can expect the election to be held sooner rather than later.

Regardless of whether the election is held in the first half or in the latter half of this year, there is little time for parties, especially the opposition, to prepare. So it is no surprise that quite a few parties have voiced legitimate public health concerns over an election held amid the pandemic. But this probably also reflects the state of readiness of these parties.

In contrast, in its statement on March 15, the WP noted that "in line with past experience," the GE is "usually called very soon after the report's release".

It urged the Government "to take caution and exercise judiciousness in calling for a GE". It added that whenever the election is called, it "will be ready and prepared for it — as we have been for the last four years".

For the general election in 2015, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong gave the assurance that "to the maximum extent possible, we [the Government] will make sure that there is enough time elapsed so that everybody can read the report, understand it and know where they stand before elections are called".

The interval between the EBRC report's release and the dissolution of Parliament then was about four weeks.

However, this time we are on an accelerated timeline given the trying time the world and Singapore are undergoing.

The twin urgency of attending to the public health threat and the imminent economic emergency will require our democracy to be ready and healthy so that Singapore and Singaporeans are more than equal to the task of overcoming whatever the pandemic throws at us.

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