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Move to tweak by-election law fails

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Current system reduces political uncertainty: PM Lee

(SINGAPORE) A motion to fine-tune a law governing by-elections was shot down in Parliament yesterday, after a strong debate on the issue.

Nominated MPs Thio Li-Ann and Loo Choon Yong had called for a by-election to be held if the minority MP required in a group representation constituency (GRC) vacates his seat or if half or more of the MPs in a GRC leave.

A by-election should also be called if an MP in a single-seat ward vacates his seat for any reason; and this should be done within three months from the time seats are vacated, unless Parliament's term is due to end in six months, the motion proposed.

Prof Thio said in her speech that such by-elections should be allowed as they provide a good assessment of grassroots sentiments and the proposed amendments to the Parliamentary Elections Act also ensure that multi-racial representation is entrenched.

The issue arose after Jurong GRC MP Ong Chit Chung died suddenly on July 14. His death sparked a public debate on whether a by-election should be held to fill his seat in the five-member GRC.

The law does not require a by-election to fill a vacancy, unless all MPs in a GRC step down. It is silent on the timeline for when a by-election must be held.

The motion drew support from a number of nominated members such as Eunice Olsen, who felt that it strengthens citizenship at a time when Singapore faces great challenges such as falling birth rates and a rise in immigration numbers.

In fact, she said, supporting the motion would send a strong message on the value which the government 'affixes to the role that Singaporeans play in building our shared future'.

She said if the motion was defeated, 'we would be telling Singaporeans that it does not matter if half or more of the MPs in your GRC vacate their seats for any reason'.

Another nominated MP, Siew Kum Hong, pointed out that if an elected MP vacates his seat, the GRC team has changed, and therefore a by-election should be called.

However, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong opposed the motion, and pointed out the current system reduces political uncertainty and that 'a minority MP should not be able to hold the other MPs in the GRC at ransom, to extract concessions'.

Plus, he explained, Singapore's political system places more emphasis on the political party that forms the government, rather than the elected MPs.

Therefore, the vacancy does not affect the mandate of the government, nor its ability to deliver on its programmes or promises.

Instead, the other GRC team members will cover the additional duties, and 'in a single-member constituency, the party will assign another MP to cover the ward'.

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