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**Title** : MPs debate by-election laws in Parliament

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SINGAPORE : Parliament saw a lively debate on Wednesday as Members of Parliament (MPs) spoke on the issue of by-election laws in Singapore.

Eight MPs spoke on the motion to fine-tune the electoral system - tabled after the death of MP Dr Ong Chit Chung in July. He had been part of the five-member Jurong Group Representation Constituency (GRC).

Filing the motion were Nominated MPs Thio Li-ann and Dr Loo Choon Yong.

Among the changes mooted under the Parliamentary Elections Act is that a by-election should be called for if a seat is vacated by a GRC member from a minority community, half or more elected GRC members, or a member of a single member constituency.

Both MPs also argued that by-elections should be called within three months from the date of vacancy, unless the Parliamentary term is due to expire within six months from the date of vacancy.

Under the current law, the timing of any by-election is up to the prime minister.

MPs who argued for the motion noted that the changes will strengthen the practice of elective democracy in Singapore. They also pointed to residents being short-changed if they do not have a dedicated representative in Parliament.

Professor Thio said: "Given the onerous burden of MPs and the importance of their constitutional role, do we really want them to take on more work and add to their many serious responsibilities? Five MPs may be able to carry out the work of six, but there will be a strain rather than peak performance.

"I do not doubt their dedication, but we are all mortal and finite beings, and fatigue will set in at some stage. I am sure we all agree that Singapore citizens deserve the best of their representatives, with a full house and all hands on deck."

But this sentiment was swiftly shot down by MP for Jurong GRC Madam Halimah Yacob who said that since Dr Ong's passing, the remaining four MPs have attended more than 15 activities at Bukit Batok and handled five Meet-the-People Sessions.

She noted that the true test of parliamentary elections is the ability of elected members to serve the people.

She said: "To me, the response of the grassroots leaders and the residents whom I had met is a great assurance. They gave us a strong mandate at the last GE (general election) and they knew that we would honour and respect that mandate even after the demise of one MP.

"They are confident that their interest and welfare will be taken care of. None have raised the issue of a by-election."

This was refuted by Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong, who said a street poll of about 300 Jurong residents showed that 56.8 per cent wanted a by-election.

Mr Siew said: "Sir, we are here today debating the nature of democracy in Singapore. Democracy is about the people, about how they have the power, and the people have spoken. They have spoken, their voice rings loud and clear, and they want a by-election."

Hri Kumar Nair, MP for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC, also disagreed with the need for a by-election should a seat held by a minority MP be vacated.

He said: "In other words, who calls (for) the by-election? Is it the PM or the MP? With this motion, the power to call a by-election is placed in the hands of one MP, whether in the GRC or SMC (single member constituency). ... our laws (do not) extend such privileges to any single member, whether

minority or otherwise."

One MP said that by doing so, it is like handing the veto power to a minority candidate which is not the intention of Parliament. - CNA/ms

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