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By-election rules to stay

By Lydia Lim, Senior Political Correspondent



Prof Thio said Singaporeans have shifted from concern with needs, to wants, from the tangible to intangible values, and 'it is healthy to interrogate rationales for laws and process at regular intervals, to test their cogency'. -- ASHLEIGH SIM/THE STRAITS TIMES

PARLIAMENT on Wednesday defeated a motion calling on the Government to change the law so as to require a by-election should the minority candidate or half or more of the members of a GRC vacate their seats.

The motion filed by Nominated MP Thio Li-ann was defeated by 62 to five votes.

Ten MPs joined in the four-hour debate, which saw Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong setting out the Government's stand for the first time since the death of Jurong GRC MP Ong Chit Chung last month sparked debate on the issue.

Mr Lee said the law was clear that a by-election need only be held when all the members of a GRC vacate their seats. There is also no deadline for when a by-election must be held, which is a matter for the Prime Minister to decide.

He also explained the political thinking behind the law.

The Prime Minister told the House that the Singapore system of representative democracy placed the emphasis on the choice of a political party to form the Government - not the choice of candidates to become Members of Parliament.

Singapore deliberately chose the first model so that individual MPs could not force by-elections at random, thereby distracting the country from more important issues. As a result, Singapore has enjoyed stability, Mr Lee said.

Under such a system, when a parliamentary seat falls vacant mid-term, the ruling party steps in to make sure affected constituents are taken care of.

'If a seat falls vacant mid-term, the Prime Minister has the full discretion when to call a by-election because the vacancy does not affect the mandate of the government, nor its ability to deliver on its programmes and promises,' he said.

PROPOSED 3 CONDITIONS FOR BY-ELECTIONS

On the three situations when by-elections should be called, Professor Thio Li-Ann proposed the following:

- If a single member constituency (SMC) seat is vacated, elections should be held within three months, pending an amendment of the Parliamentary Elections Act.
- In a GRC, she proposed that by-elections should be called within three months only when half or more GRC MPs vacate their seat.
- The third situation where a by-election should be called is when the minority MP in the GRC vacates his seat.

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