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# The Straits Times

PACIFIC ASIA NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

Singapore  
**A House fired up**

960 words  
28 August 2008  
Straits Times  
English  
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The Prime Minister and nine other MPs and Nominated MPs yesterday spoke on a motion to amend the law on by-elections. Zakir Hussain summarises some of their arguments

About the motion

Nominated MPs Thio Li-Ann and Loo Choon Yong yesterday proposed a motion to amend the law on by-elections. They wanted the law to insist on a by-election in three instances:

If the minority MP required in a GRC vacates his seat

If half or more of the MPs in a GRC leave

If an MP in a single-seat ward vacates his seat for any reason.

They also wanted all by-elections to be called within three months from the time the seats were vacated, unless Parliament's term was due to end in six months.

WHY THEY BACKED THE MOTION

NMP THIO LI-ANN

Current system arbitrary

At present, the Cabinet decides whether to call a by-election or not. There should be some clear rules on the matter.

'Would it be unwise to trust in the audacity of hoping politicians will resist partisan temptations and that fair play will triumph?'

Change will boost democracy

By-elections are also a good barometer for grassroots sentiment and can be a wake-up call or feedback mechanism for Members of Parliament, thereby strengthening representative democracy.

Voters lose their MP otherwise

Without by-elections, voters are left without representation in Parliament. This is not desirable.

New MPs can help run the GRC

A team at half-strength cannot adequately manage a GRC, and this hurts voters' interests.

However, by not insisting on a by-election when only one MP goes, a dissenting MP is less likely to vacate his seat and provoke a by-election.

Make things fair for all parties

If a PAP MP vacates his single seat, his neighbouring MP could take over his role.

But what if an opposition ward loses its MP? Having the law mandate a by-election would be fair and promote certainty.

Ensure there is a minority MP

Having a GRC without the requisite minority MP defeats the constitutional purpose for having GRCs in the first place, that is, to ensure minority representation.

NMP LOO CHOON YONG

Voters want to be represented

'The desire and aspirations of people to be adequately represented in this House should not be underestimated. We should uphold the principle and not allow convenience or cost to prevent voters from being adequately represented.'

Law can be more certain, clear

Leaving the timing of a by-election vague and ambiguous is not good practice. The law should be amended to 'give greater certainty, clarity and transparency'.

NMP SIEW KUM HONG

GRC slate no longer the same

When voters elected MPs in a GRC, their mandate was for the team as a whole.

If the make-up changes, it becomes a different team, and so a fresh mandate is needed.

Unfair to MPs, voters otherwise

The suggestion that it is all right for the remaining members in a GRC to cover for the vacated seat trivialises the contributions of elected members and is unfair to voters.

NMP EUNICE OLSEN

It strengthens citizenship

There is no better way to have people take ownership of their country than to have a say in deciding their future and be involved in the political process.

We should aspire to higher ideals

Having a full slate of MPs is the optimal situation, so we should not be satisfied with getting by with less of them.

WHY THEY OPPOSED IT

MR HRI KUMAR NAIR (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC)

Others can step in for minority MP

A minority MP serves all in the GRC, not just his racial group. So, there is no basis for making a distinction between this MP and other MPs, when arguing for a by-election to fill a vacant GRC seat.

'His constituency role will be fulfilled by his colleagues, and his national role (of representing his minority group) by the other members of his race in Parliament.'

Timeframe makes no sense

The motion exempts a by-election when the Parliament term ends in six months. This arbitrary deadline is not practical when, say, the seat is vacated a couple of days or so earlier. Taking the election process into account, the new MP could serve just two months before a general election is called. This is a waste of time and money.

It also presumes Parliament will complete its full term, ignoring the reality that the Prime Minister can call for an election any time.

Just plain wrong

When GRCs were introduced, one concern was that minority MPs would be relegated to second-class

status. But now, the motion has elevated and given them extraordinary powers, including the power to force a by-election.

'In other words, who calls the by-election - the PM or the MP?'

MADAM HALIMAH YACOB (Jurong GRC)

GRC MPs are elected as a team

Voters in Jurong GRC voted in the MPs as a team. Even if one or more members are absent, the rest can continue to represent each and every one in the GRC.

'The mandate given to us is to serve all the residents in the whole GRC as a team, and the sad loss of one of our members does not diminish that point.'

Minorities will be taken care of

Giving a minority MP sway over the GRC's fate is not the intention of Parliament. It is also not desirable as it will breed resentment against them.

All MPs attend all functions across religious groups - that is what the GRC is all about. 'The presence of the GRC constantly reminds us of the need to take into consideration the needs of the minority communities.'

Document STIMES0020080827e48s0001b