



NLW
Voting in Singapore: A right or a privilege?

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TODAY
335 words
14 February 2009
TODAY (Singapore)
AM
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English
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IS VOTING a right or a privilege for Singaporeans?

Far from being an academic question, the issue cuts to the core of the Republic's political system of representative democracy, as Law Minister K Shanmugam pointed out in Parliament on Friday.

Stressing that voting is a right and not a privilege, Mr Shanmugam said: "The power of our citizens to vote cannot be a privilege, because that would imply that there is some institution superior to the body of citizens ... But in a free country, there is no institution that can be in such a position."

Responding to questions from Nominated MP Thio Li-Ann, Mr Shanmugam reiterated that voting is an implied right, by virtue of Articles 65 and 66 of the Constitution which provide for a General Election within three months after every dissolution of Parliament.

Pointing out that countries such as Myanmar and North Korea have explicitly set out the right to vote in their Constitutions, Mr Shanmugam questioned the significance of entrenching the right as "a symbol of representative democracy".

Still, Professor Thio argued there "is virtue in writing on rights". She said: "What is protected is the right to vote, but not necessarily the content of the right to vote; for example, is it universal, is it equal, is it secret."

"If you want to educate (young Singaporeans) ... wouldn't it be just more efficient and easier to have an expressed right to vote because you do not want 12-year-old kids to go into the intricacies of Westminster?" Prof Thio asked.

Mr Shanmugam said that the Parliamentary Elections Act already sets out how the right to vote is to be exercised.

Noting Singapore "(has) among the highest voter turnouts", Mr Shanmugam added: "What is fundamental is a government committed to the Rule of Law, an educated population aware of its rights and responsibilities and stable institutions which provide for a democratic polity." LOH CHEE KONG

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