

Topic 1: Should GRCs be abolished in Singapore?

Introduction

Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) have been a cornerstone in Singaporean politics for a long time. Instead of the people casting their votes to send specific individuals into parliament, they vote for a 'team' of candidates from a specific political party. All elected Members of Parliament (MPs) are selected based on a simple plurality vote, which, in simpler terms, means that the political party that receives the most votes in an electoral division, has its full 'team' elected into parliament (Electoral Boundaries Review Committee. n.d). Each GRC comprises three to six individuals and the President of Singapore declares the number of candidates for each GRC, which is then mandated by the law. The Singaporean constitution dictates that at least one MP in a specific electoral division must belong to a minority racial community, either Malay, Indian or other minority communities. As of 2023, there are 31 electoral divisions in Singapore, comprising 14 Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) and 17 Group Representation Constituencies. The GRC system was established to ensure that the minority racial communities in Singapore would always have a voice in the parliament and their views do not go unheard (ELD, n.d). The GRC system is not found in many other countries, as not many countries have a similar situation to Singapore. Singapore is a small country, historically with four main races; Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d) This was the reason for the implementation of the GRC system. However, things have changed since then. With the rise of immigration, the change in ethnic composition and an arguably more 'race-blind' citizenry, these give rise to the question of whether our current system is still relevant (Lowell, 2011).

Historical Background

The plan to ensure minority representation in parliament was first put forth in July 1982, by then Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, when he observed that younger voters were becoming more unaware of the importance of voting in a racially-balanced number of MPs (National Library Board Singapore, n.d). This would then lead to minorities being underrepresented in Parliament, which would be pernicious for Singapore's racial harmony. GRCs became legislated on 27 May 1988 after getting presidential assent on amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore and the Parliamentary Elections Act (The Straits Times, 1988). Over time, the size and the number of GRCs have changed, to keep up with the increase in population and changing demographics.

Timeline of Events

A general timeline of the evolution of the GRC can be seen below.

Year	Description of developments
1988	The GRC scheme was first implemented in the 1988 general election when the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) drew up 13 three-member GRCs that represented 39 of the 81 seats in Parliament (The Straits Times, 1988).
2006	By the 2006 general election, there were 14 GRCs, of which nine were five-member GRCs and five were six-member GRCs. GRCs then made up 75 out of the 84 seats in Parliament. Between 1988

	<p>and 2006, the number of minority MPs elected to Parliament increased from 14 to 33 (The Straits Times, 2008).</p>
2009	<p>The government declared that the size and number of GRCs would be reduced. This was possible without changing the Constitution or the Parliamentary Elections Act. Instead, when the next EBRC was constituted, its terms of reference would direct the Committee to prepare for fewer six-member GRCs than were currently in place, as well as a reduction in the average size of each GRC (Academia, 2021).</p>
2011	<p>For the 2011 general election, there were 15 GRCs up for contest, ranging from three to six members in size. GRCs represented 75 of the 87 seats in Parliament while the remaining 12 seats were for SMCs.</p> <p>The election results saw an opposition party successfully being elected into a GRC for the first time when the Worker’s Party (WP) won the 5-member Aljunied GRC from the incumbent People’s Action Party (PAP) (The Straits Times, 2011).</p>
2015	<p>For the 2015 general election, there were now 16 GRCs up for contest and 29 electoral divisions. There were a range of four, five and six-member GRCs made (National Library Board, n.d).</p>

2019	Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong convened the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee on 1 August, intending to reduce the size of GRCs and increase the number of SMCs (Yahoo, 2019).
2020	For the 2020 general election, there were now 17 GRCs up for contest and 31 electoral divisions. There were now no more six-member GRCs as more five-member GRCs were created (Today Online, 2020).

Current Situation

Political Landscape

In Singapore, general elections happen once every five years, with the most recent one happening in 2020. There are generally three different types of MPs in Parliament. These include MPs from GRCs, MPs from SMCs and lastly Non-Constituency MPs (PARL | Members of Parliament, n.d.). The majority of MPs have come from the PAP, Singapore's ruling party, with the WP slowly gaining more seats in Parliament (Lee, 2022).

SMC vs GRC

Apart from GRCs, there has been an increased number of SMCs in Singapore's political landscape. As of the 2020 election cycle, there are 14 SMCs and 17 GRCs in Singapore (Parliament of Singapore, n.d). Single Member Constituencies, or SMCs, are electoral divisions where there is a single Member of Parliament (MP) that represents the interests of the residents in the electoral division (Election Department Singapore, n.d). Singaporeans vote for a specific candidate to represent them in Parliament. SMCs are typically in smaller districts, like Radin Mas and Hougang, for there are a smaller number of people living in that area. GRCs are typically in bigger districts like East Coast and Ang Mo Kio (Yahoo, 2020).

Current Situation

Concerns about Gerrymandering

Gerrymandering is defined as the practice of drawing the boundaries of electoral districts in a way that gives one political party an unfair advantage over its rivals or that dilutes the voting power of members of ethnic or linguistic minority groups (Britannica, n.d). Since every election from 2006,

the number of SMCs and GRCs have changed, due to the redrawing of electoral boundaries within Singapore. In a 2015 boundary report, the size of the Parliament was raised from 87 to 89 while the total number of electoral districts went up from 27 to 29. In addition, a single ward and a four-member group constituency were dissolved while another three single and one four-member group constituencies were created (The Straits Times, 2015).

What was most controversial in this redistricting exercise was the elimination of Joo Chiat SMC, hotly contested by the opposition WP candidate Yee Jenn Jong in the last 2011 general election. Yee lost narrowly, by 1%, to his PAP opponent (Today, 2015). Furthermore, in a parliament session 2023, the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Pritam Singh expressed his concerns that the GRC system was being "ridden on for gerrymandering purposes" (Mothership, 2023). He cited Feng Shan and Joo Chiat as SMCs that had gone through tight races during general elections and were absorbed into GRCs in the following elections. Critics therefore claim that in this case, there may have been some indication of gerrymandering by the incumbent party through the vehicle of the GRC system.

Concerns of MPs riding on the coattails of more established MPs

Every PAP GRC team is led by a major figure, such as a minister, which leads to some believing that new candidates ride on the coattails of more experienced PAP members. They use the example of Mr Tan Wu Meng riding on the coattails of Minister for Law K Shanmugam in Jurong GRC (The Online Citizen, 2020). They also cite evidence about how since 1991, the PAP has not made any first-time candidates run for elections in SMC wards, possibly because they may not want to lose an SMC (The Online Citizen, 2020).

Hazel Poa, a Non-Constituency MP (NCMP) from the Progress Singapore Party (PSP), said that the GRC system has yielded some "sub-optimal" outcomes, namely allowing weaker candidates to ride on the coattails of more established or popular candidates, holding voters "to ransom to vote for ministers", and stifling the country's political development by "setting higher and higher hurdles" for opposition parties are among them (ChannelNewsAsia, 2023).

Concerns of unfairly benefiting the incumbent party

Another criticism expressed at the GRC structure is that it elevates the electoral threshold for the opposition. Some feel that it may be more difficult for opposition parties to assemble teams of qualified candidates—including minority candidates—to run in GRCs. NCMP Mr Leong Mun Wai claimed that the PAP gains from the GRC structure since it allows them to assemble more capable teams (The Straits Times, 2023).

The GRC system may result in a higher barrier to entry for opposition parties as well since opposition parties need to take a bigger risk and invest a significant amount of their resources in running for office. Hence, if they wish to win an election in a GRC, opposition parties must focus their limited resources and candidates on one GRC rather than spreading their chances of winning over multiple SMCs, making GRCs a riskier choice (The Kopi Co, 2021). As demonstrated by the four elections held between 1991 and 2006, opposition parties generally did not run for GRCs. A total of 58 GRCs were up for election during the elections, 36 of which were walkovers. GRCs can be more difficult to win, even if opposing parties can gather the necessary resources and manpower to run. Opposition MP Low Thia Khiang noted in 1996 that the PAP might conceivably stifle opposition votes by combining SMCs with strong support with larger GRCs with weaker support (The Kopi Co, 2021).

Guarantee of minority representation

However, while there is the presence of other safeguards like the President's Council for Minority Rights (PCMR), it may be considered insufficient because PCMR simply examines existing policies to ensure they are not discriminatory (Tan, n.d). While the PCMR is indisputably beneficial, it cannot propose legislation that is fair to minorities. Since, there is a need to focus on the issues that affect minorities (The Straits Times, 2021), this is something that candidates from the GRCs can better ensure as there is a stipulation that at least one member has to be from a minority race. It would not be unreasonable to assume that the MP of a minority race would experience similar situations as their constituents who are minorities. This would give the government better insight into the issues faced by minorities in Singapore. Hence, the GRC requires a multiracial team of candidates. This would also encourage political parties to campaign along moderate, multiracial lines rather than a communal or racially-charged approach. (National Library Board, n.d). Indeed, the imperative of representation is vital in a functioning democracy (Bello, 2022). This is in line with Singapore's vision of a multiracial state where all races have equal representation (SG101, n.d). Therefore, given that GRCs help to ensure minority representation, some feel that it should be preserved.

GRCs may help to develop better leaders

Supporters of the GRC system argue that it helps to nurture leaders by allowing the ruling party to bring in politically-inexperienced candidates who can benefit from the mentorship and guidance of senior politicians, commonly referred to as 'anchor' ministers. They claim that this enables the government to groom potential leaders and ensure the continuity of governance in Singapore, given how the ministers have a similar outcome in mind (Today Online, 2016). For instance, in the Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC, more experienced MPs like Teo Chee Hean and Janil Puthuchery, work

together with newer MPs such as Mohamed Sharael Taha and Yeo Wan Ling (People's Action Party, n.d).

Conclusion

In light of all these events, it is important to think about the future. The political landscape of the world and by extension Singapore is dynamic and ever-changing. Like many things, the GRC system has its pros and cons and we would need to weigh whether GRCs are still relevant or whether they would become obsolete in Singapore. We also need to consider the increasing trend of more SMCs forming, to cater to each district more specifically. Only time will tell whether GRCs will continue to stand the test of time or be left behind.

Questions a Resolution Must Answer

1. Should the GRC system be changed? If so, to what extent should it be changed?
2. How should the structure of GRCs evolve to meet the needs of the people?
3. What should the broad roles of GRCs be?
4. What are some ways to make GRCs future-proof?
5. How would certain concerns as stated earlier in the guide be circumvented?

Topic 2: Should MPs serve full-time?

Introduction

Members of Parliament (MPs) mainly make up the legislative branch of Singapore's government, which is modelled after the Westminster system, and contribute to making the laws of the land (*PARL | System of Government*, n.d.). MPs serve a role in voicing out the concerns of their constituents and also have an impact on government decisions such as government budget and dictation of laws. Most MPs are elected during a General Election to represent either Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) or Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) (*PARL | System of Government*, n.d.). They can also be Non-Constituency Members (NCMPs) from opposition parties or Nominated members (NMPs), appointed by the President. The President can also appoint MPs to make up the cabinet of ministers.

Currently, MPs are paid in monthly allowances, since they play a non-executive role. Annually, MPs receive an allowance equivalent to 17.5% of the MR4 benchmark, which is the annual salary of an entry-level minister (Allowances for MPs, NCMPs & NMPs in Singapore - SingaporeLegalAdvice.com, 2023). MPs in the Fourteenth Parliament receive an annual allowance of S\$192,500 to compensate for the time and expenses their role requires. Additionally, they receive a 13th-month bonus and an Annual Variable component (AVC) which is based on their performance. However, NMPs and NCMPs, due to their lack of constituency and due to them being unable to vote on legislative matters such as budget respectively, receive an allowance of S\$28,900 annually, along with the 13-month bonus and AVC (Miao, 2022). MPs are compensated with tax-payer money and receive allowances (Tham, 2023). The pay of Singapore's politicians and civil servants is high, by international standards (Romero, 2019). According to the government,

this high pay is to ensure the effective governance of Singapore with capable and committed leadership (Committee to Review Salaries of the President, Prime Minister and Political Appointment Holders, 2011). It must be noted that this is a clean wage, and no other perks are provided (Chen, n.d.), unlike the situation in some other countries such as the United States of America (Longley, 2021).

MPs who are not employed as ministers in the Cabinet can legally hold second jobs in the private sectors (Ali, 2023). Countries such as France, Spain and Germany all allow the holding of second jobs among MPs as well (*MPs Must Firmly Tighten Rules on Second Jobs, or Lose Them*, n.d.).

Historical Overview

While civil servants in Singapore such as National Service men have long been disallowed from having second jobs due to concerns about conflicts of interests (Koo, 2020), MPs in Singapore have always been allowed to hold second jobs. However, there has been public scrutiny of MPs moonlighting due to possible conflict of interest or concerns about ability to serve constituents (Ruehl, 2023).

These concerns of conflict of interest were foreseen when allowing MPs to hold second jobs and therefore, the Parliament (Privileges, Immunities and Powers) Act of 1962 set out a section where MPs were required to declare whether they had direct monetary interests or stake in matters that Parliament was discussing that were related to business or commercial entities. This was seen as the safeguard to any conflict of interest that may arise with MPs being allowed to hold corporate and private careers.

The Prime Minister also sets out the Rules of Prudence to PAP MPs after every General Election, a set of guidelines and rules that set out how PAP MPs should act and be carrying themselves (Lee, 2020). This letter sets out core principles of integrity as well as incorruptibility and hence, contains a key section that cautions MPs to separate their business and commercial positions from their government and political ones. MPs are strongly reminded to use their positions with integrity and not exploit the privilege they hold as an MP. Furthermore, they are reminded not to use their parliamentary questions as an avenue to lobby the government and protect commercial interests.

While the Parliament Act and the Rules of Prudence set out guidelines for MPs to follow to minimise conflict of interest, concerns have been raised as to whether they are sufficient. The questions then arise: are the measures sufficient in preventing conflict of interest in government and should MPs focus on their political role with no other distraction?

Current Situation

Value of MPs holding a second job

As highlighted above, the main duty of an MP is to act as a bridge between their community and the government and do so by representing the interests and concerns of their constituents. Hence, holding a second job or a private career in addition to their government role was not disallowed as it was seen as an avenue for MPs to remain connected and in touch with Singapore's society and economy (Yeoh, 2023). The argument was that it better allowed them to represent the interests of different sections of society, thereby allowing them to fulfil their duties better.

Furthermore, allowing MPs to retain or take up private careers incentivises a more diverse spread of people from different backgrounds to serve as MPs (Poh & Heijmans, 2023). This serves to enhance the quality of debate and MPs in parliament as the expertise and experience offered by allowing different people to retain their private careers contributes significantly to the quality of work done by Parliament.

Concerns over conflict of interest

When MPs go on to take up roles within the private sector, one of the main concerns that arises is the conflict of interest between their government position and their private career. Since MPs regularly deal with legislation that affect corporations and also have several government contacts with other MPs or Ministers, the concern is that they may utilise their position, consciously or unconsciously, to benefit their business interests or the interests of their employers (Lee, 2020).

To this regard, the case of MP Tin Pei Ling's appointment as Director of Public Affairs and Policy at Grab Singapore was something that sparked debate over the potential conflict of interest that would arise from her role as an MP and her directorship. Since her role entailed liaising with and communicating closely with various governments to advance Grab's business interests (Yi, 2023), doubts were raised as to whether she was able to sufficiently separate the government and commercial responsibilities that she held. Furthermore, her role as a legislator meant that there were worries of whether the way she shapes policy and regulation would be in a manner that advances Grab's commercial interests. Eventually, the concerns raised led to her reassignment to another role as Director of Corporate Development (Poh & Heijmans, 2023).

The issue with conflict of interest is that it may undermine the trust that constituents and citizens place in their MP, which, thereafter, may call into question the decisions and actions they may

make down the road (Poh & Heijmans, 2023). Such doubt and mistrust of their actions would only serve to undermine the effectiveness of MPs in serving their constituents as citizens may not have sufficient trust that the MPs are acting in their best interests.

Concerns over MP's ability to focus on their constituencies

As seen from the duties of MPs detailed in the overview, being an MP and serving constituencies is a heavy responsibility. MPs serve both a community role, through representing the concerns of their constituents, as well as a legislative role, by debating and suggesting legislation (PARL | System of Government, n.d.). Hence, it is clear that it is a heavy responsibility to carry out and they are compensated well, with salaries being deliberately matched to the private sector to retain high-quality MPs (Ong, 2023). Therefore, doubts are often raised as to whether MPs can take on jobs within the private sector without sacrificing the responsibilities and duties they have towards their constituents. Of course, the opposing argument is that if individuals are capable of managing both portfolios, then there may be no need to curtail their activities.

Case Study: United Kingdom

MPs in the United Kingdom (UK) who do not hold positions in the Cabinet can hold second jobs. It is common for MPs in the UK to hold second jobs, and recently, with more MPs with less work experience being elected (MPs and Second Jobs, n.d.), second jobs allow MPs to gain real world experience to carry out their duties to the best extent. Moreover, they ensure MPs are able to have a smoother transition back to the workforce after serving their term and also ensure that there is diversity in the Parliament in terms of industry experience. However, MPs are required to declare their outside earnings, benefits and donations more than a certain sum of money as a way of declaring any financial interests that might potentially influence their parliamentary actions (MPs' Second Jobs and Outside Interests - UK in a Changing Europe, 2023). MPs are also banned from lobbying or providing guidance to firms, with regard to parliamentary affairs.

Recently, MPs holding second jobs, especially as advisers or executives in firms, have faced public backlash due to the case of an MP, Owen Paterson, having broken lobbying rules (BBC News, 2021). Paterson talked to officials in ministries relating to food on behalf of the food-producing firms he was working for. The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, currently Kathryn Stone, launched an inquiry into Owen Paterson's work, following which he resigned. There have also been concerns on whether having a second job will lead to lack of time to carry out legislative duties properly, arising from the case of MP Geoffrey Cox having to participate remotely in parliamentary activity while working as a barrister. Nevertheless, according to Assistant Professor Simon Weschle from the Department of Political Science at Syracuse

University, this is a rare phenomenon, and parliamentary attendance is rarely affected by moonlighting (Weschle, 2021).

Conclusion

MPs serving private and civil roles at the same time may sometimes lead to concerns among citizens, which may cause a lack of trust, potentially affecting relationships between citizens and MPs. With voters' trust and support being key to being an effective political leader, doubt about MPs having second jobs may cause strained relationships between constituents and MPs. Of course, the benefits of MPs with second jobs and the fact that many have managed their duties admirably cannot be denied. Representatives will have to weigh both sides of the argument to decide if it is in the best interest of Singapore for MPs to continue to have second jobs.

Questions a Resolution Must Answer

6. Should MPs' work in the corporate sector be restricted?
7. What are some key considerations that guidelines on conflict of interest should take into account?
8. How can the constituents' concerns about their MP's ability to serve their constituency be addressed?

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The information is accurate as of 16 February 2024.