

## Duckweed and the dilemma of Singapore's opposition



**Will more non-elected members of parliament bolster or hamper the country's long-suffering opposition, ask Stefan Tan.**

As part of ongoing electoral reforms, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has [called](#) for an increase to the number of Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMPs) from nine to 12 and to grant them voting rights on par with MPs.

First introduced by a constitutional amendment in 1984, NCMPs are members of the opposition who are awarded seats in the parliament for being the best performing losers in a given general election.

The prime minister's proposed constitutional revision has been [justified](#) as promoting government accountability and policy debate by assisting the opposition in gaining public exposure and legislative experience.

The strong mandate afforded by the People's Action Party (PAP) landslide victory in Singapore's 2015 election has increased the confidence of the ruling party in accommodating more alternative

voices in parliamentary debates.

By expanding the NCMP scheme, which serves to enhance checks against the PAP-dominated government, the PAP hopes to dispel growing concerns about the potential abuse of power and the tolerance of wrongdoing -- particularly under a regime that has enjoyed uninterrupted government since the nation's independence.

A small increase in the number of NCMPs partially addresses popular calls for increased accountability and representation of diverse views in society, while compromising only negligibly on the high premium that the PAP places on the responsiveness of government (in times of crises) and on policy stability. This is because the PAP still commands an overwhelming majority in the one-chamber legislature.

Meanwhile, the Workers' Party (WP) – Singapore's leading and only opposition party in the legislature ??? has carefully balanced its response to the NCMP scheme with a mix of criticism and reluctant acceptance.

On the one hand, the WP's Daniel Goh has [taken up](#) his seat in the legislature on 29 February following the parliament's 29 January [decision](#) to fill the NCMP post vacated by Lee Li Lian. WP's Secretary General, Low Thia Kiang, [said](#) that "having one more NCMP will contribute to debate and possibly to better policy outcomes". The WP hopes to take advantage of the NCMP seats to increase its presence in parliament, positively contribute to policy discussions and establish itself as a credible party in Singapore's politics in order to bolster its standing in subsequent elections.

At the same time, the WP has openly [criticised](#) NCMPs as the equivalent of "duckweed on the water of the pond" because they do not represent any constituency in an official capacity (hence its name), and therefore face constraints in engaging in dialogue and activities with residents. Indeed, even if NCMPs were eventually granted the same voting rights as other MPs, they will be "equal in powers, though not in responsibility and scope, to constituency MPs" as Prime Minister Lee [noted](#).

To the WP, the NCMP scheme is nothing but a political manoeuvre by the PAP to reduce the incentives for electors to vote opposition candidates into parliament as true MPs because opposition leaders have been constitutionally guaranteed parliamentary representation. NCMP Leon Perera of the WP noted the dangers of relegating opposition leaders to NCMPs, which will constitute a "negation of the evolution of genuine democracy, [and] real political balance in this country".

Such worries are not unfounded.

Contrary to the PAP's 'intention' of building opposition capacity by expanding the NCMP scheme, since it was first introduced more than three decades ago, no NCMP besides WP's Sylvia Lim has successfully exploited the platform to convince electors of his/her merit to serve as an MP in

subsequent elections.

In balancing principle with pragmatism, the WP has chosen to fill all the NCMP seats despite the party's opposition to the scheme. It recognises its constraints in protesting against the PAP-dominated system and seeks to maximise the opportunities that working within the system affords (in establishing itself through positive contributions in parliament). It is still too soon to determine whether the opposition or the ruling PAP will stand to benefit more from the expansion of the NCMP scheme in the long run.

Whether the eventual constitutional amendment will be a blessing or a curse is primarily contingent on how well the WP exploits its increased parliamentary presence to establish itself as a credible and effective source of checks and balance against the PAP regime.

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