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NEWS ANALYSIS

Mystery of the boundary changes

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THERE is one perennial mystery about Singapore's electoral boundaries which has never been explained to satisfaction.

It is this: How is it that a neutral, non-partisan bunch of civil servants can get together, study demographic changes, and recommend changes to boundaries of electoral wards that some say appear to favour the ruling party?

Maybe it's just a matter of perception, and that some people are just too suspicious of the electoral process.

Take the last time boundaries were revised, before the November 2001 General Election (GE). Charges of that G-word - gerrymandering - were hurled by the opposition.

That was the year that Cheng San GRC, which nearly fell to the opposition in 1997, disappeared from the electoral map.

Back in 1997, Eunos GRC - the 'hot' ward of the 1991 GE - also disappeared when the boundaries were revised, as did another marginal seat, Braddell Heights, which was absorbed into Marine Parade GRC under the protective leadership of then-prime minister Goh Chok Tong.

The ostensible reasons for these shifts in boundaries: population changes.

Compared to those years, this year's changes are minor.

No GRC was wiped out, although some had their boundaries tweaked. Two new single seats - Yio Chu Kang and Bukit Panjang, both helmed by feisty grassroots MPs with strong appeal on the ground - were created.

Two single seats were absorbed into GRCs: Ayer Rajah and Bukit Timah, helmed by two outspoken PAP MPs who were widely expected to step down.

Question: Surely it cannot be that a group of politically neutral, non-partisan, impartial civil servants would end up making changes that seem to accommodate the PAP's retirement plans for its MPs?

The official stand on this issue is that the changes are recommended by the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee, which goes about its work impartially.

This year's committee consists of five civil servants. It is chaired by Mr Lau Wah Ming, who is secretary to the Prime Minister, secretary to the Cabinet and deputy secretary in the Law Ministry, according to the Singapore government website.

Its other members are Singapore Land Authority chief executive Lam Joon Khoi; Housing Board deputy chief executive (building) Keung Kam Yin John; acting chief statistician Leow Bee Geok; and Mr Lee Seng Lup, from the Elections Department, who serves as committee secretary.

The composition of the panel makes sense, with the mix of expertise in land use, housing development and statistics.

It was formed in November to review the boundaries of present electoral divisions, taking into account changes in the number of voters in each ward as a result of population shifts and housing development since the last exercise.

The committee also has to follow constitutional and legal requirements. Two key ones are that there must be at least eight single-seat wards, and that at least one quarter of the MPs must be from GRCs.

The committee looks at the total number of voters, which was 2,157,840 as at Jan 1 this year.

Divide this by 84 MPs, and each ward should have an average of about 26,000 voters. The committee allows a deviation of 30 per cent from this average.

This means single-seat wards should have 18,000 to 34,000 voters, and five-MP GRCs should have 90,000 to 170,000.

If a ward falls outside this range, then its boundaries can be tweaked.

So far, it looks like a straightforward exercise in numbers.

That's a point that Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Lim Boon Heng made on Saturday:

'I don't know why people have cast doubts on how constituency boundaries have been drawn in the past. There are certain criteria that you need a certain number of voters. That's how I believe the committee has worked. It's been so in the past, it's the same now.

'Maybe this time, the population shifts have not been so great so there's no need to make such drastic changes.'

He went on to point out a fact that has not escaped observers: That tiny Potong Pasir remains intact even though its 15,864 voters is below the desired minimum of 18,000 for a single-seat ward.

He said of the opposition-held ward: 'Strictly speaking, by the criteria, it should have been absorbed elsewhere. So it would appear the committee is also sensitive that there will be public criticism if that constituency is absorbed into the GRC.'

Question: So does the committee have to take into account public sentiment? If so, does it also take into account other non-demographic, non-statistical factors? If so, how does it make sure whatever changes it proposes are fair to all parties?

Still, the silver lining in this whole issue is that this time round, the changes to electoral boundaries

are minimal.

One academic thought it reflected a confident PAP. Another opposition member said that Aljunied GRC, which the Workers' Party is eyeing, could not have been wiped out or 'it will send a very strong signal that the PAP is kiasu.' (Hokkien for scared to lose.)

Implicit in comments such as these is the assumption that the PAP Government is somehow involved in the machinations leading to the redrawing of boundaries.

But is this the case?

Tampines GRC MP Ong Kian Min said the minimal changes this time 'increase the sense of fair play', and that allegations about changes being made to suit the ruling party 'cannot be made now'.

But look closely at the changes and one can make an argument that even these can be interpreted by the sceptical as being convenient to the PAP.

There is the loss of two single-seats with PAP MPs expected to step down. Closely watched Aljunied GRC loses part of its Kembangan ward around the Eunos area, and gains Serangoon Gardens, a staunchly middle class area. According to conventional wisdom, middle class voters are more likely to be PAP supporters.

East Coast GRC, where five out of six MPs have served more than 20 years and may be due to retire, is shrunk to a five-MP GRC.

Are these changes tactical, or merely serendipitous coincidences arising from demographic shifts?

Surely the whispers cannot be right, that the PAP, indirectly or otherwise, has a say? Voters would like to be reassured otherwise.

So the good news from this year's boundaries report is that, as MP Ong notes, it gives rise to less talk than before about that G-word.

But the truth is that the issue remains, of how the boundaries committee can best go about doing its work revising electoral boundaries, in a manner that is impartial, and seen to be without fear or favour.

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