



Research Office
Legislative Council Secretariat

Fact Sheet

Parliament of Singapore

FSC23/15-16

1. Introduction

1.1 Singapore has a unicameral Parliament which performs the functions of making laws, controlling the state's finances and acting as a check and balance on the actions of the government. This fact sheet provides an overview of the Parliament of Singapore in terms of its composition, election method, committee system and administration.

2. Composition of Parliament

2.1 The Singapore Parliament comprises three categories of Members, which are: (a) elected Members; (b) Non-Constituency Members; and (c) Nominated Members.¹ The *Constitution* stipulates that up to nine Non-Constituency Members may be appointed from among unsuccessful opposition candidates who obtained the highest percentage of votes in an election. The appointment of Non-Constituency Members is to ensure that the views of the opposition can be expressed in Parliament.

2.2 Meanwhile, the *Constitution* also empowers the President of Singapore to appoint up to nine Nominated Members from among non-partisan individuals with distinguished performance in their respective fields, after taking into account the recommendation of the Special Select Committee chaired by the Speaker of Parliament.² Nominated Members are appointed for a term of two and a half years,³ and their appointments represent an effort to have a wider representation of the community views in the legislature.

¹ Both Non-Constituency Members and Nominated Members have voting rights in Parliament. However, they cannot vote on budget or appropriation bills, bills to amend the *Constitution*, motions of no confidence in the government, and motions to remove the President of Singapore from office.

² Suitable nominees come from a list of candidates proposed by the general public at the Committee's invitation.

³ This contrasts with elected Members and Non-Constituency Members who serve for a term of five years.

2.3 Singapore's parliamentary election is held once every five years unless the Parliament is dissolved earlier by the President. The last election was held on 11 September 2015⁴ and the People's Action Party ("PAP") won 83 of the 89 elected seats in Parliament.⁵ The remaining six elected seats went to the opposition Workers' Party. The next parliamentary election must take place by April 2021.⁶

2.4 The current composition of 101 Members of Parliament ("MPs") comprises:

- (a) 89 elected Members, comprising 83 PAP Members and six Workers' Party Members;
- (b) three Non-Constituency Members of the Workers' Party; and
- (c) nine Nominated Members not connected to any political parties.

3. Parliamentary election method

3.1 The current composition of Parliament includes 89 elected Members who are elected on a first-past-the-post basis either from (a) 13 Single Member Constituencies that return 13 seats in total or (b) the 16 Group Representation Constituencies that return 76 seats in total. To stand for the Group Representation Constituencies, political parties should field four to six candidates in a particular constituency and at least one of them comes from the Malay, Indian or other minority communities. Each elector can vote for one party list and the list with the most votes wins all the seats in that constituency.

⁴ The *Constitution* provides that the election should be held by January 2017, but the ruling People's Action Party called for an early election on 11 September 2015 and the President dissolved Parliament on 25 August 2015 upon the advice of the party.

⁵ PAP's overwhelming victory was partly attributable to its ability to capitalize on the goodwill engendered by celebrations held in August 2015 to mark the 50th anniversary of independence from Malaysia, as well as the patriotic fervour generated by the death of founding leader Lee Kuan Yew in March 2015.

⁶ In accordance with Article 65 (4) of the *Constitution*, Parliament's term lasts for five years from the date of its first sitting (held on 15 January 2016 for the current legislature). Article 66 also stipulates "[t]here shall be a general election at such time, within three months after every dissolution of Parliament". For the current legislature, those three months fall between January 2021 and April 2021.

4. Committee system

4.1 There are three types of parliamentary committees in Singapore: (a) Standing and ad-hoc Select Committees established under the Standing Orders of Parliament; (b) the Special Select Committee on Nominations for Appointment as Nominated Members of Parliament ("NMPs") established under the *Constitution*; and (c) Government Parliamentary Committees ("GPCs") established by PAP.

Standing and ad-hoc Select Committees

4.2 Standing Select Committees are permanently constituted committees which are either chaired by the Speaker⁷ or an MP appointed to the position. In addition to the Chairman, the Standing Select Committee comprises other MPs to be appointed by Parliament, in such manner to ensure that, so far as is possible, the balance between the government benches and the opposition benches in Parliament is reflected in the Standing Select Committee.

4.3 There are a total of seven Standing Select Committees currently in operation, namely:

- (a) House Committee which considers and advises the Speaker upon all matters connected with the comfort and convenience of MPs;
- (b) Committee of Selection which informs Parliament by means of a report when any Member has been nominated to any Committee;
- (c) Committee of Privileges which looks into complaints of breaches of parliamentary privilege and any matters that appear to affect the powers and privileges of Parliament;
- (d) Estimates Committee which examines the government's budget and reports what economies, improvements in organization, efficiency or administrative reforms consistent with the policy underlying the estimates, may be effected and suggests the form in which the estimates shall be presented to Parliament;

⁷ PAP Member Halimah Yacob has been the Speaker since January 2013, the first woman to hold the elected position.

- (e) Public Accounts Committee which examines various accounts of the government showing the appropriation of the sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure, and such other accounts laid before Parliament as the Committee may think fit together with the Auditor's reports thereon;
- (f) Public Petitions Committee which considers public petitions referred to it and reports to the House; and
- (g) Standing Orders Committee which considers and reports on all matters relating to the Standing Orders of Parliament which may be referred to it by Parliament.

4.4 Apart from Standing Select Committees, Parliament sometimes forms ad-hoc Select Committees set up on a motion approved by the House to deal with Bills or other matters referred to it. Ad-hoc Select Committees are mostly set up to discuss the details of a Bill which affects the everyday life of the public, such as the *Goods and Services Tax Bill* and the *Advance Medical Directive Bill*.

Special Select Committee on Nominations for Appointment as Nominated Members of Parliament

4.5 Under the *Constitution*, a Special Select Committee on Nominations for Appointment as NMPs is set up to consider proposals submitted by the public as to persons who may be considered for nomination as Nominated Members by the Committee.

Government Parliamentary Committees

4.6 GPCs were first established by the ruling PAP in 1987 to generate alternative views in the legislature. They have no constitutional status but are instead an initiative of the PAP government. GPCs comprise only governing party members, but each of them is backed by a resource panel of subject experts and lay persons.

4.7 PAP allocates to each GPC a portfolio corresponding to one or more ministerial portfolios. Each GPC examines the policies, programmes and proposed legislation of a particular government Ministry, provides the Ministry with feedback and suggestions, and is consulted by the Ministry on issues of public interest. There are a total of 12 GPCs looking at (a) communications and information; (b) culture, community and youth; (c) defence and foreign affairs; (d) education; (e) environment and water resources;⁸ (f) finance, trade and industry; (g) health; (h) home affairs and law; (i) manpower; (j) national development; (k) social and family development; and (l) transport.

5. Administration of Parliament

5.1 The Secretariat assists Parliament in its functions and all matters connected with its procedures and practices, the organization of its business and proceedings and the work undertaken by its committees. The Clerk of Parliament is the Chief Executive of the Secretariat and serves as the principal adviser on parliamentary procedures and practices. He or she is appointed by the President after consultation with the Speaker and the Public Service Commission.

5.2 In performing his or her role as the Chief Executive of the Secretariat, the Clerk is supported by a Deputy Clerk, Principal Assistant Clerks and Assistant Clerks. The Clerks are responsible for the day-to-day management of the work undertaken by the various departments within the Secretariat which include: (a) Parliamentary Clerks; (b) Official Reports; (c) Language Services; (d) Security; (e) Corporate Services; (f) Estate and Facilities; (g) Education & Publicity; (h) Library/Research; and (i) Computer Information Systems. These departments together support the Secretariat in its role as the provider of specialist advice in relation to the House's proceedings and other support services.

⁸ Dr Lee Bee Wah (李美花) is the Chairperson of the GPC for Environment and Water Resources and Gan Thiam Poh (顏添寶) the Deputy Chairperson.

5.3 The independence of the Clerk of Parliament and his or her staff are protected to some extent by the *Constitution*. According to the *Constitution*, the Clerk of Parliament may only be removed from office if Parliament, by not less than a two-thirds majority of all MPs, resolves that "he [or she] ought to be removed for inability to discharge the functions of his [or her] office (whether arising from infirmity of body or mind or any other cause) or for misbehaviour". The *Constitution* also stipulates that the staff of Parliament shall not be eligible for promotion or transfer to any other office in the public service without the consent of the Speaker.

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