Return the GRC scheme to its roots

BY EUGENE K.B. TAN

ALTHOUGH the writ for Singapore's 10th General Election (GE) has yet to be issued, the electioneering has begun to earnest. The Workers' Party (WP) fired the first salvo with its manifesto for a sensible and inclusive future. I don't think we are any better at political campaigns these days. The WP argued that it "dilutes the weight of the group representative multi-racial ethos". The PAP is expected to release its manifesto in a representative multi-racial form.

PAP and WP... (continued from previous page)

No one will quarrel with the virtues of multiracialism manifest in a representative multi-racial Parliament. The disagreement lies in how to achieve this. The GRC is an electoral innovation that ensures that minority candidates are elected in sufficient numbers so that the needs, concerns and views of the Malay and Indian communities are not ignored or neglected in an essentially Chinese-dominated Singapore. Despite the talk of the electorate's minority and commitment to multiracialism, the elite believes that Singaporeans still vote along racial and religious lines. Since its introduction in 1988, the GRC system has transformed the electoral landscape. It has expanded dramatically. The maximum size of a typical GRC team has doubled, and the number of GRC parliamentary seats has increased significantly. As a result of GRC being introduced, the number of single-seat constituencies has diminished from slightly more than half of all parliamentary seats in 1988, to one quarter in 1991. By the 1997 and 2001 GE, MPs from single seats accounted for only one-tenth of elected parliamentarians.

Ironically, this enlargement of the GRC scheme did not find its inspiration in the furtherance of the multi-racial ideal. Rather, it was to accommodate the plans for larger town councils in order to cope with 1990s in size. In 1997, community development councils (CDCs), the "social parallel" of the town councils, were added to the fold. Town councils and CDCs are popularly perceived as related entities, and closely linked to the PAP. As a result, the delivery of services via these agencies as well as the appointment of staff who are often the ethnic Chinese electorate. To the writer, the GRC scheme is in danger of evolving into a convenient, catch-all political device for different purposes. Amid all this, its original aim of ensuring a multiracial Parliament may be diluted. Minority MPs end up being elected in an incidental and pro-rata effort of the GRC scheme. This does no justice to them or the multiracial ethos. Further, the fundamental principle of adequate minority representation, on its own terms, becomes poorly imprinted in the electoral process and on the electorate. No one will quarrel with the virtues of multiracialism manifest in a representative multi-racial Parliament. The disagreement lies in how to achieve this. The GRC is an electoral innovation that ensures that minority candidates are elected in sufficient numbers so that the needs, concerns and views of the Malay and Indian communities are not ignored or neglected in an essentially Chinese-dominated Singapore. Despite the talk of the electorate's minority and commitment to multiracialism, the elite believes that Singaporeans still vote along racial and religious lines. Since its introduction in 1988, the GRC system has transformed the electoral landscape. It has expanded dramatically. The maximum size of a typical GRC team has doubled, and the number of GRC parliamentary seats has increased significantly. As a result of GRC being introduced, the number of single-seat constituencies has diminished from slightly more than half of all parliamentary seats in 1988, to one quarter in 1991. By the 1997 and 2001 GE, MPs from single seats accounted for only one-tenth of elected parliamentarians.

Ironically, this enlargement of the GRC scheme did not find its inspiration in the furtherance of the multi-racial ideal. Rather, it was to accommodate the plans for larger town councils in order to cope with 1990s in size. In 1997, community development councils (CDCs), the "social parallel" of the town councils, were added to the fold. Town councils and CDCs are popularly perceived as related entities, and closely linked to the PAP. As a result, the delivery of services via these agencies as well as the appointment of staff who are often the ethnic Chinese electorate. To the writer, the GRC scheme is in danger of evolving into a convenient, catch-all political device for different purposes. Amid all this, its original aim of ensuring a multiracial Parliament may be diluted. Minority MPs end up being elected in an incidental and pro-rata effort of the GRC scheme. This does no justice to them or the multiracial ethos. Further, the fundamental principle of adequate minority representation, on its own terms, becomes poorly imprinted in the electoral process and on the electorate.