Ministers' Pay hike: What's the political price tag?

The increase in ministers' salaries will cost the Government an extra $10.5 million. But will it be the political cost of pushing through such an unpopular policy? Lydia Lim, Peh Shing Huei and Sue-An Chia find out.

THS numbers just don't look good, lamented Neo Soon Sang, government leader Peh Phin Such. "The cost of the policy is prohibitive," he said, "but unless we do it, we might have to pay the price later on." And the price, he suggests, might be the loss of the next election.

Everyone in the Government, from the Prime Minister down, has acknowledged that it was politically a very difficult decision to make. To Sendhara GRC MP K. Shanmugam, the need for a pay bylaw was "a necessity", but he was worried that public sentiments were negative and the decision was bound to be controversial. "This is one of those policies on which political capital has been invested. We must make sure that the longer term benefits are clear," he said.

But how high is the political price that the Government will have to pay?

What fallout, if any, is there likely to be in the coming months and finally culminating in the next election?

There are issues that will go on after the election, and why the next one comes around, most will have forgotten it, he predicts.

Debating the debate

But first, what - if anything - was achieved by having the debate in Parliament? After all, no one had any doubts that the Government would push on with the policy.

But the debate itself did add debate on ministers' pay moved forward on several levels.

The Government was determined to be as transparent as possible. It spelled out clearly and in full details on salaries, including, for the first time, just how many ministers received how much and how that related to the exact size of the top salaries.

Mr S. Iswaran, Minister of State for Trade and Industry, helped it along by stressing that "public transparency is important".

He added: "Most importantly, it has enabled the Prime Minister to articulate clearly the Government's philosophy on public servants and why it is critical to Singapore's future to have a skilled, motivated and committed public service, not just in the top salaries, but generally."

But was it a successful debate?

Mr Chong views the issue as "just different."

"I said in Parliament that the Government's position is very clear. It is committed to the pay of all its public servants, top or bottom. We are looking for a way that the pay of the top salaries, says Tampines GRC MP Bose Lwin, who was present at the debate.

A member of the opposition had approached him outside Parliament House and asked if the House was still relevant to the people of Singapore. He had told him he'd be fed up with "all these discussions," recalls Mr Lwin, who then went for "agile low" about the debate on the floor.

But then told her "they know we are doing an important thing here and we are doing it right there," and to expect it.

He had witnessed Singapore's transformation and believed continued growth could not be taken for granted. "I could have hugged him," she told him.

"The debate has created a greater awareness on the moral obligation of the pay and it has been widely noted. I think it has been worth it," he said.

But for those who were convinced this was not the right move, more remained unswayed.

Nor should we be surprised. The debate allowed them to voice their frustrations but points out that it did not bring about any policy change.

But some deliberations may help the swelling of a bitter pill, through, suggest, many it public relations experts.

Others like Mr Nathaniel Hamilton of the National University of Singapore and Mr Eddy Chen of the South-East Asian Studies Programme are ardent that the debate achieved "nothing.

"The media were subjected to pointedly ridiculous and misleading justifications for the pay hike," she says.

"Senator Chen views it as "already done". But the general public will feel that it is momentous."

Richard Tan Poh Yeh GRC MP. "Tweezer "Twee believes the debate is important and it is necessary to have such a debate." But that is not to say they had made up their minds.

And those unenriced of their positions, "appreciate the Government's transparency and are probably more receptive to the proposal now," she says.

How high a political price?

AS FOR the impact the pay hike is likely to have on Government support, it is too early to say. It seems that much depends on how one is from the time the debate was announced.

Alternatively observing politics from a distance believes the debate will make the government of pay increases appear to minimize, to the hit it could take at the ballot box in the next election as is the case of South-East Asian studies sociologist Teo Beng Chong.

He suggests that while the debate may be the only front which is open, another front could be the debate. "The Government has to get the points across to the public before the debate. It is wrong to interpret this as a retreat," he says.

Several MPs have been quick to trumpet the Prime Minister's decision to donate his pay increase to the next election as a public relations exercise.

Sms or e-mail us your views

WHAT do you think is the political price that the Government will have to pay for pushing ahead with the policy? Do you think it is a necessary move to counter the rising health-care costs? Or will the public have sympathy for the policy?

E-mail 7555@times.com.sg or SMS to 7555. For SMS replies, type followed by a space, your name and your message.