

# Maruah Position Paper on Electoral Boundary Delimitation

Defending the Legitimacy of  
Singapore Elections

9 Oct 2014



DIGNITY FOR ALL

# Right to free and fair elections

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 21 (3)

The will of the people shall be on the basis of the authority of the government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures

- UN Human Rights Committee's General Comment 25

The principle of one person, one vote, must apply, and within the framework of each State's electoral system, the vote of one elector should be equal to the vote of another. The drawing of electoral boundaries and the method of allocating votes should not distort the distribution of voters or discriminate against any group and should not exclude or restrict unreasonably the right of citizens to choose their representatives freely

# Electoral Boundary Delimitation as Practiced in Singapore Today

- Process is shrouded in secrecy
- Frequent unexplained changes in electoral boundaries
- Large variations in voter:MP ratio
- Electoral boundaries do not coincide with community boundaries

# Lack of Transparency

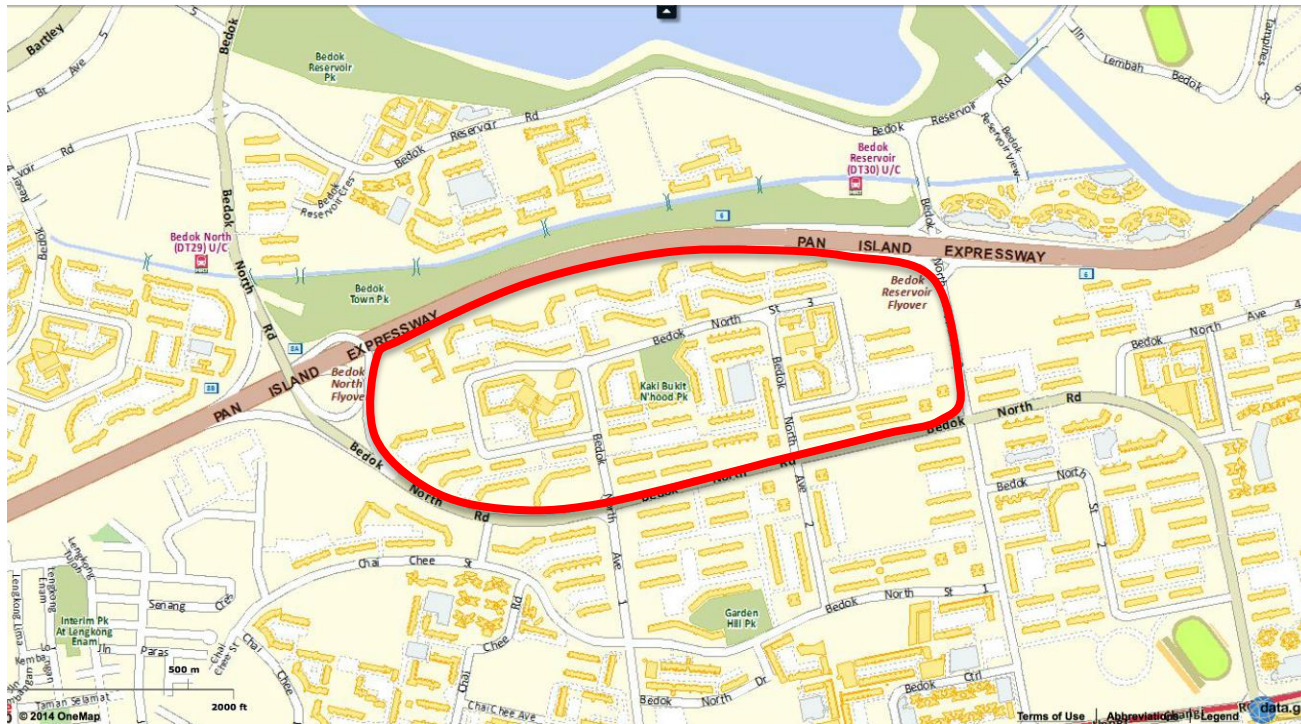
- Parliamentary Elections Act gives Government the power to decide on the total number of MPs, the boundaries of electoral divisions and which divisions to designate as GRCs
- No public representation on the Electoral Boundary Review Committee (EBRC)
- No reasons are given for decisions of the committee
- Level of detail of EBRC report has decreased over time

Year	Electors	MPs	Length of EBRC report
1954	300,000	25	4,500 words
2011	2,351,000	87	1,500 words

# Transparency in Polling Results

- Vote-counting has been decentralized by polling district since 1997. Precinct-level data is available to candidates as their Counting Agents observe the count
- Elections Dept (ELD) does not officially release precinct-level results
- Outside observers are unable to objectively assess whether partisan factors play a role in electoral boundary changes

# Frequent Boundary Changes Kaki Bukit



- Part of the old Jalan Eunus Malay Settlement
- Developed as part of Bedok New Town in the early 1980s
- Part of Kaki Bukit constituency until creation of GRCs in 1988

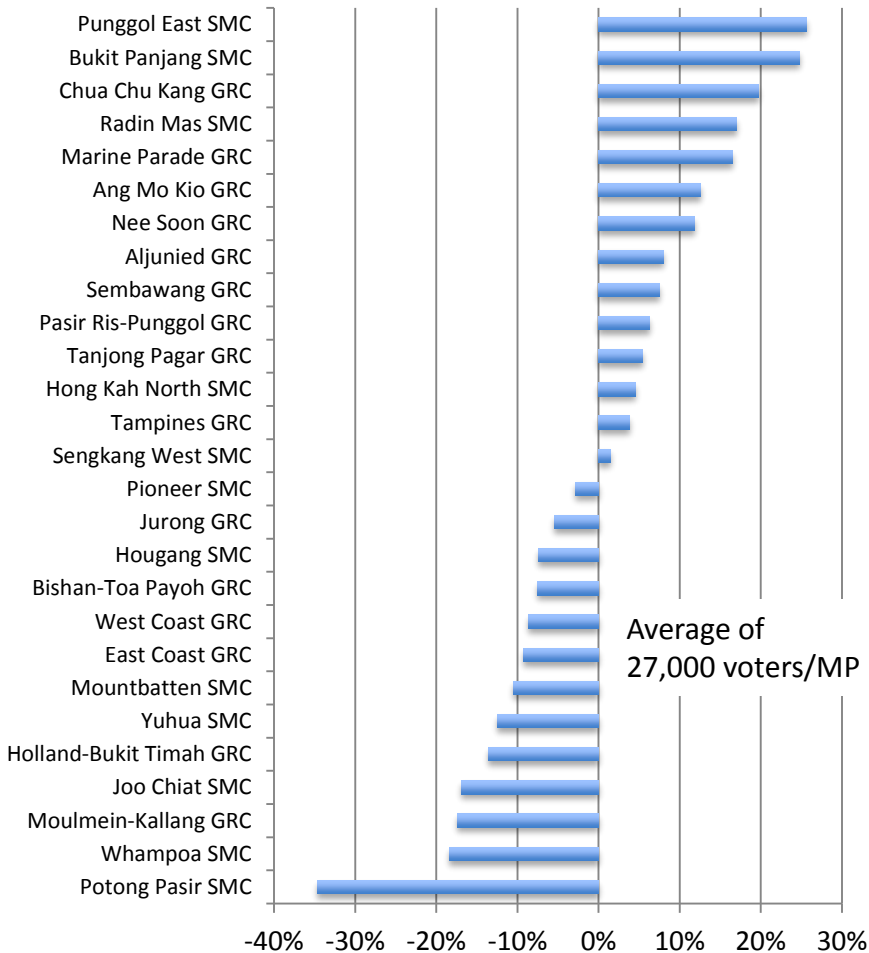






# Unequal representation

## Variation in Ratio of Voters per MP Compared to national average



- EBRC guideline is  $\pm 30\%$  variation
- Punggol East has almost 2X more voters than Potong Pasir; 54% more than Whampoa
  - Potong Pasir voters have 2X the voting power of Punggol East voters
- Many countries only allow 5-10% variation
- Is the disparity acceptable for other, e.g. historical or cultural reasons ?

# Minority Representation

- Singapore's Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system ensures representation of minority races in parliament
- Executive determines both
  - Number, size and location of GRCs
  - Assignment of minority "quotas" to different GRCs
- How does racial demographics determine the allocation and drawing of GRC boundaries ?
- See Maruah Position (Q3 2013) for further discussion of the GRC System

# International Principles for Electoral Boundary Delimitation

- The International Foundation for Electoral Systems has put forward the following fundamental principles for delimiting electoral boundaries
  - Impartiality
  - Equality
  - Representativeness
  - Non-discrimination
  - Transparency

# Impartial Boundary Authority

*The boundary authority should be a nonpartisan, independent and professional body*

- While members of the EBRC are civil servants, final say on boundary delimitation and even the number of MPs and GRCs rests with the Executive
- In New Zealand, Australia and India, decisions of the delimitation authority are final. Many other countries do require executive or legislative approval

# Equality of Voting Strength

*The population of constituencies should be as equal as possible to provide voters with equality of voting strength*

- Legal limits of 5-15% are typical in most countries
- Singapore's limit of 30% is extremely high, considering that we are a very homogeneous and urbanized city-state

# Representativeness: Maintaining Communities of Interest

*Constituencies should be drawn taking into account cohesive communities, defined by such factors as administrative boundaries, geographic features and communities of interest*

- Many countries require their boundary authorities to take into account “communities of interest” when drawing boundaries
- Singapore’s pre-independence delimitation committee included this as an objective in 1954
- No longer included in the EBRC Terms of Reference and not adhered to in practice today

# Report of the Electoral Boundaries Delimitation Committee 1954

“We tried to look at our proposed divisions through the eyes of the elector and the candidate. The elector should see clearly why he is in one division rather than in another; lines of demarcation, therefore, must be easy to follow. The area should not be bigger than the elector would travel normally and with ease. He must see that he has a common interest with his fellow electors.”

“From the point of view of the candidate, the division must not be too large in number or diverse in interest for him to canvass his electors, or care for his constituents, once elected. He is concerned with the roads and with centres where he can hold meetings. It would also be his wish to represent a division where the community of interest and its distinctness from the interests of others is clear.”

# Non-discrimination to Safeguard Minorities

*Constituencies should not be drawn in a manner which discriminates against disadvantaged minorities*

- Singapore has adopted the GRC system to ensure representation of minority races in parliament
- Criteria for selecting GRCs and allocating minority representation are not publicly disclosed



# Transparency: Public Consultation

*The delimitation process should be as transparent and accessible to the public as possible*

- The rationale and criteria for determining the number of constituencies, selection of GRCs and drawing of boundaries are not disclosed
- EBRC reports do not provide any explanation for their decisions
- There is no public consultation in the boundary delimitation process in Singapore

# Recommendations

- Create independent EBRC
- Improve transparency of EBRC deliberations and polling data
- Require public consultation before gazetting of changes in electoral boundaries
- Align electoral boundaries to communities of interest
- Reduce disparity in voter:MP ratio

# Create Independent & Impartial EBRC

- Set up independent electoral boundary authority by statute
- Members to include technical experts on cartography, demographics, statistics and election administration as well as lay persons
- Political parties may be invited to attend as observers (no voting rights)
- Decisions to be made by majority vote of the panel
- Parliament can vote to accept or reject but not modify proposed boundary changes

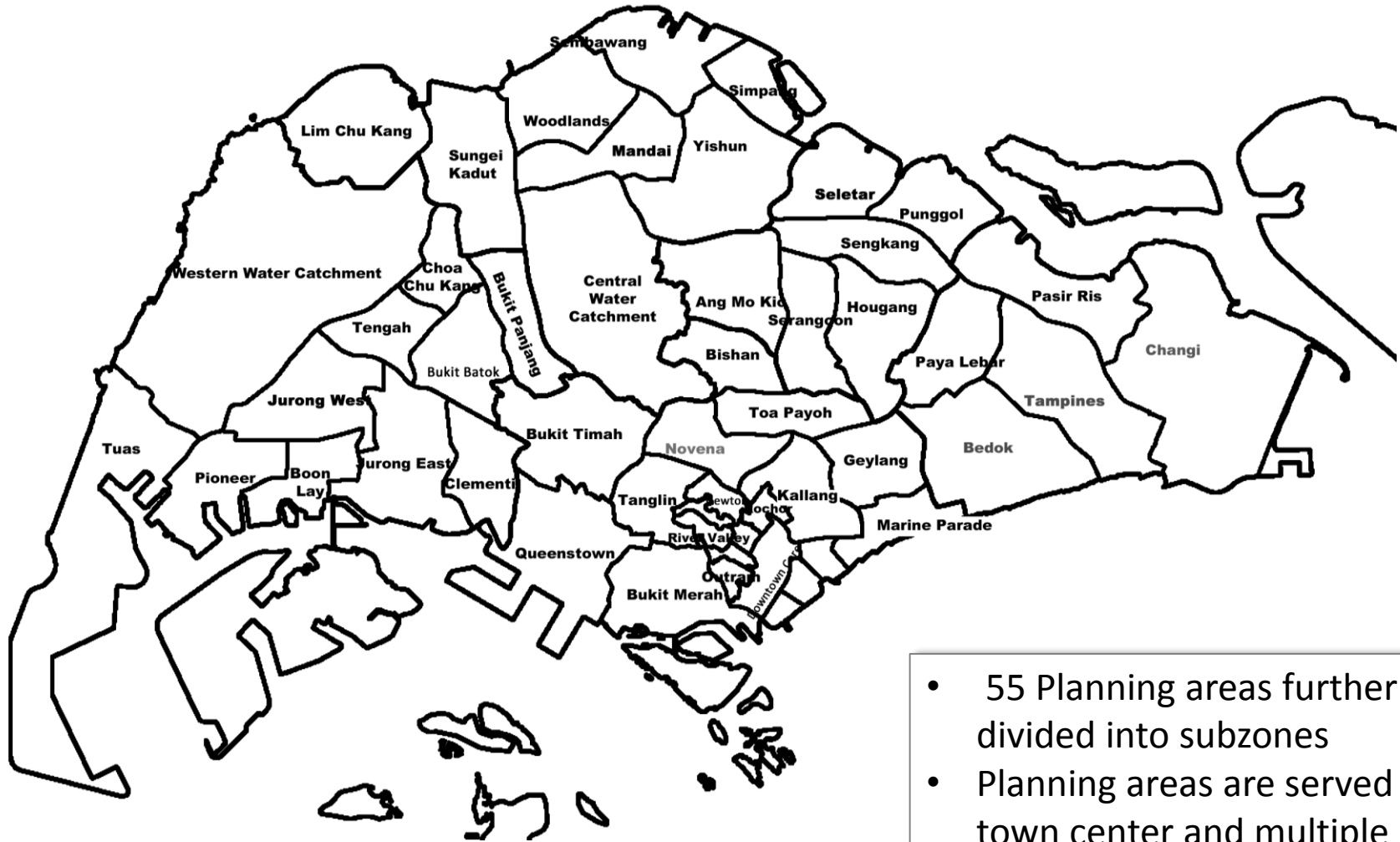
# Improve Transparency & Public Consultation

- Provide more data on reasons for boundary changes
  - Population profiles by age, race etc.
  - Development plans and population forecasts
- Publish breakdown of election results at precinct level
  - Allow independent verification that boundary changes are not influenced by partisan factors
- Require public consultation during redistricting process and prior to submission of recommendations to parliament

# Align Electoral Boundaries with Communities of Interest

- Urban planning in Singapore is based on Planning Regions, Areas and Subzones
  - Planning Areas form Communities of Interest with each Planning Area containing a town centre and several neighbourhoods
  - 55 Planning Areas with about 150,000 residents each
- Maruah proposes that Electoral Boundaries be aligned with Planning Areas
- Create stronger community identity and simplify provision of municipal services
- Avoid appearance of gerrymandering

# URA Planning Areas



- 55 Planning areas further divided into subzones
- Planning areas are served by a town center and multiple neighbourhood centres

# Constituencies

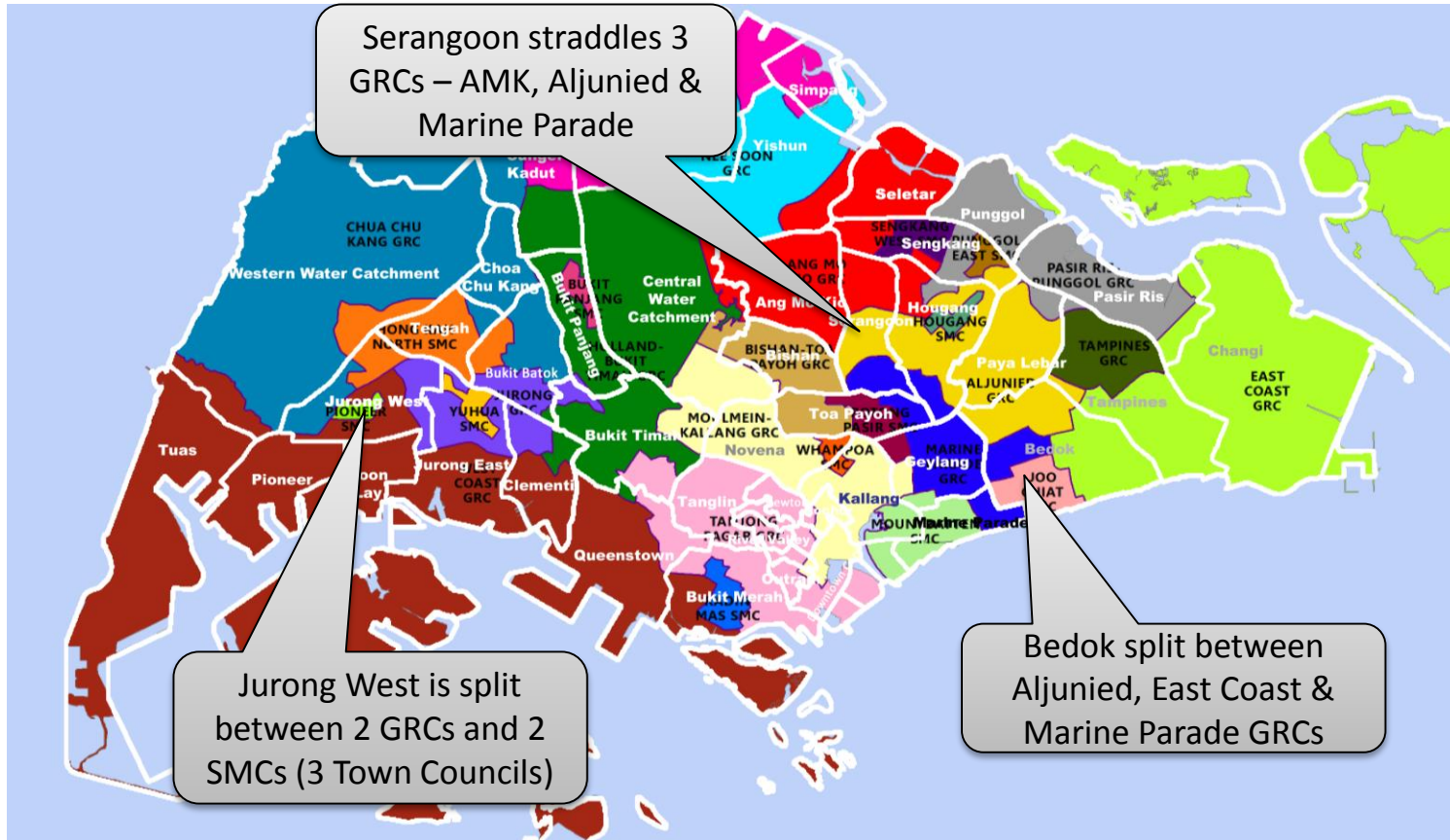


# Constituencies & Planning Areas





# Align Electoral and Urban Planning Boundaries



- Electoral Boundaries and HDB Estates/Planning Areas often do not coincide at present - Weakens community identity and creates appearance of gerrymandering
- MARUAH proposes to align electoral boundaries with URA planning boundaries where possible

# Conclusion

- Delimitation of electoral boundaries can be a key factor in election outcomes
- The delimitation process in Singapore is opaque and not subject to public scrutiny. Some boundaries appear to be arbitrary or designed to favour one party
- Results in weaker community ties and cynicism towards the political process
- Maruah urges the government to raise the level of impartiality, equality, representativeness, non-discrimination and transparency of the boundary delimitation process in Singapore