

Historic opportunity for Hong Kong constitutional development

By Carrie Lam, Chief Secretary for Administration

Yesterday (April 22), the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region released its proposals for the election of the Chief Executive (CE) in 2017 by universal suffrage.

The proposals come after two rounds of public consultations that started back in December 2013 and ended in March this year.

But these proposals are not just the culmination of a 16-month period of discussion, debate and, at times, divisive protest.

They are the culmination of an 18-year journey for Hong Kong's political system since our return to China in 1997.

They also represent a historic milestone for our country some 25 years after the election of the CE by universal suffrage was promulgated in our constitutional document, the Basic Law, by the National People's Congress of China.

During our wide-ranging consultations, one thing was very clear: Hong Kong people eagerly look forward to casting their own ballots to elect the next Chief Executive in 2017.

To make this aspiration come true, our legislators must approve the proposals by a two-thirds majority - that is, 47 of the 70 seats. We hope the vote on this will take place before the summer recess in July.

This will be a hard task, since 27 lawmakers have repeatedly vowed to veto the package. I surely hope that they will change their minds, heed public opinions and seize their place in

history.

When Hong Kong was under British administration, Governors were dispatched from London to govern this city. We had no say in the matter.

Since 1997, the Chief Executives have been selected by an Election Committee (EC) - initially 800 members but later expanded to 1200.

Although these 1200 members are from four different sectors and mostly returned by elections, Hong Kong people still have no direct role in selecting the Chief Executive. All we could do was to watch the process on TV.

Now, we are proposing major changes to this process.

For a start, up to five million eligible voters will be able to tick the ballot for their preferred Chief Executive candidate for the first time. Hong Kong people will no longer be passive observers but active participants in the electoral process.

In the run-up to the polling day, Chief Executive candidates will have to hit the hustings to explain and promote their election platforms to the public. For the first time, we will have a full-fledged election campaign to be decided by your average Mr Chan or Ms Wong.

The nominating process has attracted much comment and criticism, much of which stems from ignorance about Hong Kong's constitutional set up.

Under the Basic Law, a Nominating Committee (NC) as a whole

must nominate candidates for the public ballot. This is not a new requirement or an added restriction - it has been in the Basic Law all along. This NC will mirror the 1200-member Election Committee

The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress decided in August last year that there must be two to three candidates on the public ballot to ensure a choice and a competitive election.

Under the current system, potential candidates need to secure 150 EC nominations to qualify as a candidate, and there is no limit on the number of nominations a candidate could receive. Then, as mentioned, the 1200-member EC makes the choice for Hong Kong's 7.2 million residents.

We propose lowering this threshold to 120 and capping it at 240 at the EC member recommendation stage. This means up to 10 people could vie for the right to be one of the two to three nominated candidates - something akin to a 'primary' runoff.

This 'primary' runoff is also new, and will inject an additional element of competition. Those vying for a place on the public ballot will have to widely promote their platforms to NC members as well as the public.

Hong Kong is now at a crossroads. We are urging Hong Kong people - especially our legislators - to take the road not yet travelled to support our political reform package.

We believe it will make a big difference to our political system and election culture. The whole electoral process will become more inclusive, transparent and competitive. And the Chief Executive will have a greater mandate and accountability to

the whole Hong Kong population than ever before.

If we miss this golden opportunity, the election of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage would be further delayed. We would then retain the same electoral system we have now.

In addition, any chance of introducing universal suffrage for electing all members of the Legislative Council, possible only after the Chief Executive is elected by universal suffrage, would be further deferred.

It will be a crying shame if Hong Kong becomes stuck in such a political time warp.

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