

Modi plans biggest elected parliament with more women's seats

ANDRES SCHIPANI — CHENNAI

MICHAEL STOTT — NEW DELHI

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has fired the starting gun on the country's largest democratic overhaul in more than five decades that would increase the number of female legislators while creating one of the world's biggest parliaments.

Modi's government yesterday launched a parliamentary debate on "delimitation" — the redistribution and increase of parliamentary seats to reflect India's vast and growing population. A vote is expected by tomorrow.

Under the proposed bill, the number of members of the Lok Sabha will rise from 543 to 850, making it the world's largest democratically elected lower house. The constitutional amendment is part of a wider legislative package that includes a plan to reserve one-third of parliamentary seats for women.

Modi said the bill was an overdue "sacred opportunity". "We have got the chance to include half of the country's population in the decision-making process," he told parliament.

Ranjana Kumari, chair of the advocacy group Women Power Connect in New Delhi, said the move was "overdue". With just 13 per cent female representation in parliament now, "it will change the nature of power", she added.

But critics say delimitation favours the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. They argue Modi's proposal tips the balance towards the northern, poorer and more populous states where his party enjoys electoral dominance, while giving less representation to opposition-controlled southern states where the BJP has historically performed poorly.

The BJP-led ruling coalition needs a two-thirds majority to pass the amendment. Members of the opposition alliance said that while they support the implementation of the women's quota, they are united against delimitation.

MK Stalin, chief minister of the southern state of Tamil Nadu, yesterday burned a copy of the bill, which he claimed disproportionately enhances the political power of northern states.

"This has become a north-south issue rather than an issue on women's representation," said Neerja Chowdhury, the Delhi-based author of *How Prime Ministers Decide*, of the legislative package.

In parliament, Modi dismissed suggestions there was any "political self-interest" in the bill.

"Whether it is the south, the north, the east, the west, small states or large states . . . this decision-making process will not discriminate against or do injustice to anyone," he said. "If you need a guarantee, I give you a guarantee; if you need a promise, I make a promise."

India's constitution allows for the readjustment of constituencies in the lower house after every census but it last reapportioned seats in 1973, when its population was about 548mn, compared with 1.4bn now.

Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi argued that what the government "is proposing now has nothing to do with women's reservation. This amendment is an attempted power grab using delimitation and gerrymandering."

Additional reporting by Jyotsna Singh in Chennai