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Let us not centralise town council services

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POLITICS AND ESTATE MANAGEMENT

Let us not centralise Town Council services

EUGENE K B TAN



With the Government accepting the findings and recommendations of the Ministry of National Development (MND) Town Council Review Report, the focus has now shifted to a "strategic and comprehensive review of Town Councils". This is timely and needed.

The three-month review was primarily to examine the 2010 sale of the PAP Town Councils' Town Council Management System software in an open tender to Action Information Management (AIM), a PAP-owned

company. The MND is satisfied that public funds were safeguarded and that residents' interests were not compromised in the sale and lease-back transaction.

It would appear that the kerfuffle between AIM and the Workers' Party (WP) stemmed from a "different understanding of the execution of the termination clause" in the IT contract following the transfer of Aljunied Town Council from the PAP to the WP after the latter's May 2011 electoral victory in Aljunied GRC.

To my mind, the issue was unnecessarily politicised after the WP laid the blame on the termination of its IT contract with AIM for lapses in running the Aljunied-Hougang Town

Council. This incident reflects the political "new normal".

A POLITICAL GENESIS

The town council (TC) was first established in 1989. While the main intent of the TC framework was to provide for the decentralisation of the control, management, maintenance and improvement of Housing and Development Board (HDB) estates, the political consequences were even more significant.

That TCs are inherently political was evident from the outset, and it would be naive to think otherwise.

As a form of local government, TCs transformed the role of the

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elected Member of Parliament (MP) from being a mere politician to one that included administrative responsibilities. MPs are now directly responsible and accountable to their resident-voters for the day-to-day running, upkeep and upgrading of their HDB estates.

While not solely determinative of the MP's political fortunes, there are political implications to the quality of estate management, given the abiding concern of Singaporeans with the value of their residential properties.

TCs, in the words of Ministry of National Development Permanent Secretary Benny Lim, "were set up for, and fulfil a political purpose".

As the report noted of the TC's political character: "It is inevitable that the TC function is carried out in a competitive politicised context."

Mr Lim added that the "party political nature of TCs operating in a competitive context raises a constant risk of politicising town council administration".

IDENTITY AND KAMPUNG SPIRIT

Should we revert to the pre-1989 situation in which the management and maintenance of public housing estates was HDB's sole responsibility? I would rather not.

Firstly, it is likely to result in our HDB estates not developing their own distinctive identities as HDB would adopt a cookie-cutter approach to avoid any allegations of preferential treatment.

Secondly, nationalisation of estate management would take away a vital platform for an elected MP to not only administer and run an estate, but also to work with town councillors and residents in a common effort to make one's immediate living environment better — not just in terms of physical aesthetics, but also in creating the so-called "kampung spirit" for strong community bonds.

Thirdly, the nationalisation of estate management in a more competitive political landscape would mean that an elected MP's accountability and ability will be reduced, at a time when it should be of growing importance. This is because any MP would simply be able to lay the shortcomings in estate management at the feet of HDB — and, indirectly, the Government.

Let me be clear that parliamenta-

ry elections cannot be about electing persons who are only competent in TC management.

The MP's TC function will not take away the need for an MP to be an effective representative of his/her constituents; it will, rather, add to the centrality of elected MPs in our system of government. It will also add another dimension to the relationship between elected MPs and the electorate.

CHANGEOVER PROTOCOLS NEEDED

The challenge for the TC, as the report has identified, is how to ensure that its political nature does not affect the continuity of services to residents whenever there is a change of MPs from different political parties.

As I see it, the risks of politicisation of TC administration are magnified in three instances: When there is a handover of a TC from one political party to another following an election; the TCs' practice of tapping people who share the political party affiliation, be it party members or supporters of the MP, and engaging them as TC-paid staff or awarding them contracts; and during the hustings, when the incumbent's TC management record is scrutinised or challenged, which is par for the course.

On the first point, the risks of politicisation should not be exaggerated. Apart from the AIM matter, the handover from the PAP to the WP of Aljunied TC was relatively smooth. There was no known major disagreement between the Singapore People's Party and the PAP in the handover of Potong Pasir Town Council in 2011; as well as between the PAP and the WP in the handover of Punggol East after the January 2013 by-election, save for the use of the TC office there.

In the MND's report, some suggestions for better management of changeovers are given and they are worth following up.

While MND's light regulatory approach in TC matters should be continued, the MND should take a more prominent role in overseeing any changeover. New subsidiary legislation may need to be drafted to prescribe the protocols in a changeover.

RELATED PARTIES: MORE TRANSPARENCY PLEASE

While latitude should continue to be extended to TCs and MPs in engaging those who share their political agenda or are affiliated to their parties, better controls and safeguards ought to be introduced to ensure the interests of residents remain a paramount priority in all commercial transactions. This is notwithstanding the fact that the Town Council Act does not prohibit such transactions.

All political parties that have run TCs — the PAP, SDP, WP and SPP — have entered into contracts or employed staff with related parties. Indeed, it would appear that this is not uncommon. For instance, the managing agent appointed in 2011 for Aljunied-Hougang Town Council was FM

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Solutions and Services, a company set up in May 2011 by a former General Manager of Hougang Town Council.

The MND should consider introducing measures to promote transparency and accountability in TC management; at the same time, information pertaining to related-party transactions should be publicly available.

LET COUNCILLORS BE ELECTED

Beyond reducing the level of politici-

sation of TCs, the comprehensive review should also consider the "softer" aspects of TCs, such as how devolution of control and management of public housing estates can imbue in residents a stronger sense of personal and collective responsibility. This potential has yet to be realised even after two decades.

Perhaps town councillors should be residing in the areas where they serve, and be elected by residents rather than appointed by the MPs,

as is the practice today. This might give more of an impetus to grassroots democracy.

Given that Group Representation Constituencies — which is to secure adequate minority representation in Parliament — and TCs were mutually grafted onto each other in their development, delinking the two institutions can prove helpful in ensuring that the mission and objectives of each can be better attained.

Let us not centralise Town Council services

A balanced approach should be taken towards the politicised nature of TCs. Politics is a reality in a large public undertaking, such as the management

of TCs. To pretend that we can divorce politics from it and yet gain the benefits is not realistic.

The *raison d'être* behind the TC generates political competition — it should not be for the sake of competition, but the competition engendered should motivate political parties to raise their game and deliver on their electoral promises.

The proposed comprehensive review of TCs should endeavour to reduce the "fundamental tension" be-

tween the political and administrative functions of the TCs.

A more robust set of rules and procedures, as well as safeguards can remove unnecessary political catfights.

But this should not take away from the fundamental character of TCs which is, ultimately, about promoting good governance and improving people's lives at the local levels. Re-centralisation of control would be a retrogressive step.