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Let us not centralise town council services

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Headline: Let's not centralise Town Council services

POLITICS AND ESTATE MANAGEMENT

Let us not centralise Town Council services

EUGENE K B TAN



ith 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 the blame on the termination of its IT an open tender to Action Information Management (AIM), a PAP-owned ning the Aljunied-Hougang Town TCs transformed the role of the

company. The MND is satisfied that Council. This incident reflects the popublic funds were safeguarded and litical "new normal". that residents' interests were not compromised in the sale and lease- APOLITICAL GENESIS back transaction.

fle 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 contract with AIM for lapses in run-

It would appear that the kerfuf- 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,

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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 HDR 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 scru-tinised or challenged, which is par for

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 Aliunied 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.

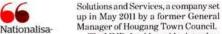
While MND's light regulatory ap

proach 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 chang

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 manag ing agent appointed in 2011 for Alju nied-Hougang Town Council was FM



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Manager of Hougang Town Council. The MND should consider introducg measures to promote transparency management and accountability in TC management; would mean at the same time, information perthat an elected taining to related-party transactions MP's accountshould be publicly available. ability will be reduced, at a

LET COUNCILLORS BE ELECTED

Beyond reducing the level of politici-

view should also consider the "softer" aspects of TCs, such as how devolution of control and management of public housing estates can imbue in

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.

residents a stronger sense of personal

and collective responsibility. This po-

tential has yet to be realised even after

sation of TCs, the comprehensive re- 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

Politics is a reality in a large public

of TCs. To pretend that we can divorce politics from it and yet gain the ben-functions of the TCs. efits is not realistic.

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

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

tween the political and administrative

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

But this should not take away from should motivate political parties to raise their game and deliver on their which is, ultimately, about promoting good governance and improving people's lives at the local levels. Recentralisation of control would be a