

REVIEW OF TOWN COUNCILS; Residents prefer apolitical agencies: Poll

Most of them feel it is not necessary to link town council duties to politics

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One finding of a government-led review of town councils is that it is not uncommon for these agencies to appoint supporters and affiliates of their political party to work for them.

This practice goes to the heart of why town councils were set up more than 20 years ago: to let MPs take charge of their own estates and be held accountable to voters.

But the political aspect of town council management is now the subject of debate, after the Ministry of National Development (MND) released its report last Friday.

The report, which was accepted by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, calls for a strategic review of town councils and comes ahead of a ministerial statement by National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan in Parliament next Monday.

It noted public sentiments to depoliticise town councils, so that disputes over the handover of a town council's operations from one political party to another would not arise, and governance would improve with MND's oversight.

A Straits Times poll of 50 Singaporeans who were familiar with the report was conducted yesterday. It found 41 who shared these sentiments, especially Housing Board residents.

Their main argument: It was not necessary to link town council duties to politics, and the duties might even distract MPs from their parliamentary work.

To some among the majority, the main concern was the lack of a level-playing field and the impact on residents. For instance, opposition-run town councils had fewer economies of scale and resources compared with People's Action Party (PAP) town councils. That became more apparent when the HDB stopped providing essential maintenance and computer services to town councils by 1996.

Entrepreneur Sahara Sadik, 34, believes that if MND were to run all town councils, huge savings could be reaped from economies of scale. MPs would then "be our voice when we need to raise grievances or requests to MND-run town councils", she said.

But only one of the dozen MPs and experts interviewed supported this view.

Corporate governance expert Mak Yuen Teen of National University of Singapore believes town councils can be both depoliticised and decentralised.

He suggested that each have its own board to oversee the estate, made up of people selected for their background, skills and competencies - similar to the management committee of a private estate, but on a larger scale.

Such a move would address concerns of MPs like Mr Inderjit Singh of Ang Mo Kio GRC.

Mr Singh said if depoliticising town councils meant centralising them under HDB, it would make it harder for town councillors to make changes quickly at the local level. Former MP and town council chairman Ang Mong Seng said estates would also all look the same, with little differentiation to meet local needs.

Most MPs and experts who wanted town councils to remain as political entities suggested the MND take over some of their tasks or exercise more oversight.

Their main concern was to ensure essential services for residents were not disrupted during a change of political parties.

Veteran MP Charles Chong of Joo Chiat proposed that the HDB take over essential services, while Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP Zainal Sapari suggested that the MND supply the IT system for all town councils.

Agreeing, former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong noted that every town council needs an IT system. For a political party to develop it for each town council, "it's a waste of money".

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies said the problem lies with the handover, where a more detailed process needs to be spelt out.

She also said making MPs accountable to constituents for how they run town councils was a way for them to prove they were willing and able to serve voters, and earn their trust and support.

Yesterday, MND also gave examples of how town councils could be political in nature. Responding to media queries, it pointed to some town councils which had tapped party members and supporters. (See sidebar)

The report last week also dealt with concerns over a controversial sale of software rights by PAP-run town councils to a PAP-owned company. It gave the all-clear, but some remain unconvinced by the finding that the deal is above board, MPs and experts said.

One point of contention is why the company, Action Information Management (AIM), would take on a loss-making venture in 2010.

AIM had said it was to help the PAP town councils, which had no takers for a near-obsolete software program.

But some think "this is too good to be true", said MP Baey Yam Keng of Tampines GRC.

While many were not surprised by the findings, most of the 50 polled felt that having the MND do the review affected public perception of the report's finding, even if it was wholly objective.

Even those who accepted the finding that the PAP town councils did no wrong under current rules wanted the regulations to be relooked during the strategic review of town councils.