

Group gazetted as political association

Zulkifli Bin Othman

Today, 4 February 2010

A day after its application to be registered as a society was approved, following a 10-month wait, the group Singaporeans for Democracy (SFD) has been gazetted as a political association under the Political Donations Act — meaning that it cannot accept donations from “impermissible or foreign sources”.

In a statement yesterday, the Registry of Political Donations (RPD) under the Elections Department said the decision based on the fact that the group states, in its constitution, that its objectives relate mainly to politics in Singapore.

For instance, the group — which is led by pro-tem president and former Workers Party candidate James Gomez — says it will advocate for political and legislative reform and “campaign for democracy-related issues”.

The Act, which came into force in 2001, prohibits political parties, associations and candidates from accepting foreign donations, on the principle that “politics in Singapore should be for Singaporeans only”, said the RPD.

The Prime Minister can declare an organisation a political association if its “objects or activities relate wholly or mainly to politics in Singapore”. “This is to prevent foreign persons or organisations circumventing the provisions of the Act by donating to such organisations instead of political parties,” added the RPD.

Dr Gomez, now an Australian-based academic, said he was not surprised by the move to gazette the group under the Political Donations Act.

“What is happening now is no different to what happened to the Think Centre ten years ago,” he said.

In 2001, the Think Centre and Open Singapore Centre were designated as political associations after they organised public forums and a protest against the Internal Security Act.

He added that the SFD had planned to only source for funds locally “as it is more effective and easier because it’s a local cause that people can relate to”.

Political analysts felt the move was expected.

“Dr Gomez is not an unknown entity here and he has worked with foreign organisations to do political research. Therefore the move is consistent with the Government’s stance that the political scene here not be influenced by outside parties,” said Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Assistant Professor Eugene Tan said: "I think the Elections Department would have taken a look at the SFD constitution and even the personalities in its committee."

The 10 pro-tem committee members include lawyer Chia Ti Lik, activist Seelan Palay and filmmaker Martyn See.