

What's next after the AHTC motion? Analysts and Aljunied GRC residents give their take

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It may not be possible to enforce Parliament's resolution calling on two Workers' Party (WP) leaders who were involved in the Aljunied-Hougang Town Council court case to be removed from handling financial matters.

However, the motion which has been passed by the House effectively brought the issue of good governance of town councils to the public's attention and allowed the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) to make clear its stand on the matter, political analysts said on Thursday (Nov 7).

Indeed, two days after the dust has settled from the testy exchanges between the WP Members of Parliament (MPs) and several PAP Cabinet ministers, some residents living in the opposition wards told *TODAY* that they now hope for proper accountability in the management of their estate.

At the same time, they have mixed feelings about the political overtones of Tuesday's debate, the residents in Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC) said.

Parliament passed a motion calling for WP's Aljunied GRC MPs Sylvia Lim and Low Thia Khiong to recuse themselves from all financial responsibilities related to AHTC in the wake of a High Court judgement, which ruled that the duo had breached their fiduciary duties towards the town council. WP is appealing the judgement.

Ms Lim is the vice-chairman of AHTC and heads its finance and investment committee, while Mr Low is a member in the estate and community liaison committee.

Even though it has passed, the resolution is not binding on the AHTC.

If that is the case, Madam Choo Fong Fong, 52, a part-time office administrator living in Aljunied GRC, wanted to know what was the point of the four-hour long debate.

WHAT THE MOTION WAS FOR

Answering this question, a number of political watchers told *TODAY* that the motion effectively made it known to the public what Singapore expects of its parliamentarians, whichever political party they serve.

This was carried out even though there is little that the PAP Government can do if the AHTC elects not to recuse both its leaders from financial matters, they said.

Singapore Management University's (SMU's) law don Eugene Tan said: "If there is nothing in the law that the Government can use to compel AHTC to act, then perhaps the debate was

an attempt at exerting political pressure and moral suasion, or even a demand on WP and AHTC, that this is the right thing to do in accordance with prudent corporate governance.”

Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie, a Singaporean political analyst at the Education University of Hong Kong, said that if anything, Tuesday’s proceedings signified that the parliamentary majority — and the citizens it represents — have voiced their disapproval of the current arrangements at the AHTC.

“Given that the MPs who are asked to recuse themselves from their town council are from the opposition, it is easy for the issue to be framed as a political or partisan one. Certainly, the impending elections would lend further credence to such a view,” Asst Prof Woo said.

“However, the resolution is more fundamentally about the exercise of financial propriety and prudence by MPs.”

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, agreed. She noted that the PAP Government had stated its position on AHTC a few times.

“It is clear that the PAP Government wanted to mark out the standards of governance that it hopes all, including itself, will be held to. It was a statement of its operating principles and values,” she said.

In Parliament, the clarion call by the PAP speakers — to ask AHTC to do “the right and proper thing” in the interim before the case is concluded — was repeated many times.

As Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, who tabled the motion, said in his closing speech: “My question is a very simple one... What’s the right thing to do for members of the Workers’ Party? I think members of this House know the answer. Members of the Workers’ Party know in their hearts the answers.”

WP speakers had rejected the motion, stating it is up to AHTC to deliberate in an internal meeting. Mr Low said the same to reporters on Wednesday that he would leave it to the town council to determine his role in the meeting, which has not been scheduled to take place.

Mr Heng said that WP’s refusal to act against its MPs would mean that the Government would be “forced to express its concerns” to the AHTC three-member independent panel, which was appointed by the town council and had sued the WP MPs for damages.

The panel declined comment when contacted. One panel member, Senior Counsel Philip Jeyaretnam, said that he has “nothing more to add” on the AHTC episode.

Dr Koh said that by forcing WP to state its stand on public record, the public and Aljunied residents can decide how their interests are managed with regard to their own town councils.

All three analysts said that the AHTC case would now certainly be in the eyes of the public in the coming General Election.

Dr Koh said: “It will be useful to understand how Aljunied residents, (more than) half of whom voted for the WP team in the last General Election, view the matter today.”

WHAT RESIDENTS THINK

On Thursday, TODAY spoke to some residents of Aljunied GRC.

Among the 10 residents interviewed, several said that they thought Mr Low and Ms Lim should step away from managing the town council's financial affairs.

Retired delivery driver Farid Abdullah, 70, said that the duo should not be handling public monies with this "cloud hanging over them", and that they should withdraw from those positions until the case is over.

Housewife L Reyes, 33, said that recusal does not imply any guilt. "It is just better to step down from handling money until they are proven to be innocent," she said.

Mr YS Toh, 30, an IT consultant, said he read the High Court judgement and thought that the two MPs had made "a grave error of judgement".

"Would they have done better with a proper tender-calling process when the transition process (from PAP to WP) was tilted against them? Perhaps the odds were stacked against them from the get-go, but once their integrity is in question, their action could never be described as correct," he added.

However, there were others who felt that Mr Low and Ms Lim should not be recused, downplaying the parliamentary motion as being politically motivated.

Mr PY Lim, 67, a retiree and resident of 25 years, said that it was "a big problem" to be appointing one's friends as a managing agent without calling for an open tender, which went against the rules. The case has also negatively affected his view of the WP MPs.

However, he felt that Mr Low and Ms Lim should not be recused unless AHTC decides to do so. He said in Mandarin: "They have an internal process. It should not be up to us residents or the PAP to decide because it can be politically biased."

Ms Wendy Lee, 42, a resident of 29 years and who is self-employed, was also against the recusal as she was satisfied with the MPs' work in running the estate so far. She felt that the debate was "like a political show". "At least it caught my attention," she said.

Assoc Prof Tan of SMU noted that the PAP MPs could have been more effective if Tuesday's debate focused on the practice of corporate governance and the importance of political accountability.

He said: "In the minds of some people, there is a sharp political edge to the debate. But the WP also overplayed its hand by not pledging to have Mr Low and Ms Lim recuse themselves — this is a High Court judgement no less, which is binding until overruled or varied by the Court of Appeal."

On Tuesday, Nominated MP (NMP) Walter Theseira abstained from the motion as he was uncomfortable that it could be a "political resolution". NMP Anthea Ong also did not vote.

Responding to Assoc Prof Theseira in Parliament, Social and Family Development Minister Desmond Lee said: "I do not blame the two NMPs or members of the public if they perceive this (motion) to have partisanship colours, but actually, if you strip it down to its very core, what should fiduciaries do? In any case, not just any fiduciary, but one sitting among us, held to certain standards by a member of the public."

Mr Lee pointed out that the public would expect the PAP to act against its own MPs in such a scenario, too, in order to safeguard public funds.

"That is not something that is political. It is something that any organisation would do," Mr Lee said.