

CPIB probe pivotal in demonstrating trustworthiness of gov't

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Will the high-level probe be completely transparent and open?

Is the selection process for key appointment holders robust enough?

Why were the investigations and suspensions only revealed after a newspaper broke the story?

These were some of the questions raised by media analysts and political watchers Yahoo! Singapore spoke to following the news that the chiefs of the SCDF and CNB, Peter Lim and Ng Boon Gay, are both currently being investigated by the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB).

Both are currently suspended from their duties following "serious personal misconduct". While mystery surrounds their actual offence, The New Paper has reported the involvement of a female executive with a company that supplied IT-related products and services to government offices.

The paper also reported that the female developed "a close working relationship" with both men, who were "unaware of each other's dealings with the woman".

"The government of Singapore has to deal with the issue of transparency, and the management of finances at the top; there are too many situations where the government is not recording effectively how it is managing its money," said political science lecturer Bridget Welsh.

Late last year, two senior employees at the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) were jailed after being convicted of cheating the agency of some \$11.8 million, triggering a round of intensified security checks by other ministries like the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), which later charged one of its clerical officers in December for some 455 instances of fraud amounting to more than \$600,000.

"It is also a test for (Prime Minister) Lee Hsien Loong to see how he responds to a clear potential abuse of authority," she added, noting a lack of "checks in the system" at the highest levels of public office, as compared with what she sees as over-regulation at lower levels of public service.

Senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies Gillian Koh noted that the emergence of this case through the media indicates that there must be grounds to the complaint filed against Lim and Ng, and called on the CPIB to be "surgical" in its examination.

"(They need to) go beyond what is seen to investigate all who could be involved, even to the 'n' degree of separation from these two specific personalities," she said, maintaining, however, that the level of trust of public officers and institutions must be reinforced through their handling of the case.

Law lecturer Eugene Tan added that the revelation of the case raises questions over the robustness of the selection process for key appointment holders in public office, as well as whether or not the existence of corruption or misconduct is limited to a few “bad eggs” or if it is more widespread.

“I would also be inclined to wonder if we need tougher sanctions and whistle-blowing laws,” he said.

Analysts noted that being fresh in Singaporeans’ minds, it is possible that some may draw an immediate connection between the emergence of the case and the recent ministerial salary debates, during which the ruling government argued in favour of paying high salaries in order to prevent corruption and to attract better talent.

They all agreed, however, that the ongoing investigation should be looked at independently.

Koh argued that pay is but one factor of a multi-faceted system that sustains Singapore’s world-renowned low levels and instances of corruption, which include uncompromising surveillance and opportunities for public whistle-blowing.

“While it just continues the argument (of salaries) at one level, this particular case has to be judged from the merits of the dynamics involved,” added Welsh, who noted that it would be useful to wait on further details of the investigation to emerge before being able to make further inferences about its implications.

Media observers were surprised at the way in which this case was revealed, however — through a breaking news story, instead of an announcement by the government soon after the arrests were made (one in mid-December, and the other in early January).

Media consultant P. N. Balji said that he found it “disturbing” that the official news of Lim and Ng’s investigations and suspensions from their posts came only after a Chinese daily reported the story, noting further that the two were put on leave at the start of the CPIB’s investigations, almost three weeks before an official announcement was made by the MHA.

“It is another example of the government appearing to be reactive rather than proactive,” he said. “During a time when transparency has become a watchword in Singapore politics, this kind of behaviour is difficult to comprehend.”

Welsh saw the emergence of the investigation as a sign of the government’s increasing openness, however, although stressing that the question of its follow-up response, whether it will go beyond an apology, which she noted “has become the norm” here, still stands.

“This revelation is important from the perspective of the fact that it’s a problem, and it’s coming out — I’m not sure we could have seen this emerge a year ago... it’s a reflection of the strength and increasing openness of the government,” she said.

“No society is perfect, and no government is perfect, and so the question is what is going to be done, and what are the lessons that will be learnt?”