

THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COUNCILS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SINGAPORE

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DIGNITY FOR ALL

Background

- This paper is the 4th in MARUAH's electoral reform series: ***“Defending the Electoral Legitimacy of Singapore Elections”***
- These papers are premised on the rightful access to a free and fair election as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Articles 21 and 22).

Human Rights Context

- Articles 21 and 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights state:

“Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives”;

“Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and ... in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.”

Human Rights Context

- Article 25 of the UN International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights states:

“Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity...to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives”

- Where representatives are chosen:

“Real popular input [is to be] institutionally accommodated”

(Comment 79, UN Human Rights and Elections Handbook)

Human Rights Context

- According to Article 1(7) of the ASEAN charter:

“[One of the purposes of ASEAN is] to strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and the rule of law, and to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, with due regard to the rights and responsibilities of the Member States of ASEAN.”

Introduction

- Community Development Councils (CDCs) set up in 1997
- Tasked with promoting social cohesion and the administration of social assistance programmes
- Intended as social counterparts to the Town Councils, which deal with estate management
- Unlike Town Councils, which are only managing agents of the HDB, CDCs belong under the PA (and hence the govt)

Introduction

- PA appoints the CDCs, including the mayors
- Since 2001, all CDCs have been headed by mayors
- Mayors are elected MPs holding a non-elected office.

Key Challenges for the CDCs

Elected MP in a Non-Elected Role

- Non-elected nature of CDCs and mayors means people are deprived of right to have a say in how their Council is run
- Can be alienating for those who wish to participate in grassroots activities without getting into partisan politics
- Problematic when CDC covers opposition wards

Key Challenges for the CDCs

Social Cohesion: Lack of Value-Add in Relation to Existing Agencies

- CDCs' programmes tend to be separate from those organised by the PA, its grassroots organisations and other movements
- Non-distinctive and duplicative—what the CDCs can do, the PA et al can usually do equally well if not better
- In areas such as Art & Culture, Youth, Sport, PA has a strong programme offering. CDCs pale in comparison

Key Challenges for the CDCs

- Social isolationism still appears to be the norm—little progress has been made
- Thus we still have some way to go to attain social cohesion
- If PA and its huge network of grassroots organisations cannot do the job, unlikely to expect that the CDCs can

Key Challenges for the CDCs

Hollowing Out of the CDCs' Social Service Role

- In the beginning, CDCs took over administration of social security assistance schemes from the bureaucracy
- However, this role now appears to be usurped by the newly established Social Service Offices
- In a sea of social service providers, the CDCs are being pushed out of the picture

Key Challenges for the CDCs

Cost

- CDCs receive generous government funding
- E.g. every \$1 of donation is matched by up to \$4 from the government, capped at \$24m annually
- FY2013 operating budget for entire PA (including CDCs) was \$424m
- Given the duplication and redundancy of the CDCs, this money could perhaps be put to better use elsewhere

Overseas Case Studies

- Japan

- System of directly elected governors (prefectures) and mayors (municipalities)
- Partisan allegiance not a deciding factor in a mayor's degree of influence
- Localities able to influence central government policy
 - E.g. Anti-pollution drives of 1970s

- UK

- Traditionally centralised state
- In a bid to restore local democracy, Labour government introduced directly elected mayors in 2000
- Many instances of vastly improved municipal performance

Overseas Case Studies

- US
 - Federal system with high degree of local autonomy
 - Directly elected mayors can be powerful source of change

Overseas Case Studies

Lessons for Singapore

- Not a zero-sum game: centralisation and decentralisation can co-exist harmoniously (Japan)
- Councils led by directly elected mayors can be powerful grassroots force for change (US)
- Size does **not** matter: Luxembourg, just 3.5x Singapore's size, has 118 non-overlapping municipalities.

Recommendations

MARUAH recommends to:

- Dissolve the existing CDCs in their current political form;
- Replace them with Councils ***led by popularly elected non-partisan mayors***;
- PA to cede all control of the existing grassroots organisations to the new Councils; and
- Funding to these Councils to come from the government, with full discretion in the expenditure of these monies.

Recommendations

Benefits:

- **Accountability**—the buck stops with the mayor and Government is completely out of the picture
- **Sense of political ownership**—decision-making process and outcomes are shaped by local residents themselves
- **Will foster greater political maturity**—participation and debate cultivates and refines political literacy

Recommendations

Benefits:

- **Provide test-bed for ideas**—socio-political theories can be put into play in a relatively low stakes setting
- **Improved social cohesion and sense of belonging**—things will get noisy and heated, but this is how deeper solidarity is forged

