

Strengthening Integrity in Political Governance in Singapore

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Singapore has enjoyed a long-standing reputation for good governance and low corruption. In 2023, news of wrongdoing and graft have cast a shadow over this. How should we read these developments and how can integrity in political governance be strengthened?



POLITICAL GOVERNANCE

The quality of Singapore's political governance came under intense scrutiny in the first half of 2023. This happened as the country geared up for its sixth presidential election and continued towards a measured leadership transition from its third prime minister (PM), Lee Hsien Loong, to his designated successor, now Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Lawrence Wong.

Between May and July of 2023, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan and the Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam were investigated by the feared Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB), an independent agency responsible for the investigation and prevention of corruption in Singapore. The CPIB established that there was no evidence of corruption or criminal wrongdoing in the said ministers' rental of government-owned, conserved black-and-white bungalows on Ridout Road.

PM Lee had ordered this as well as another review of the ministers' actions by Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean in response to suggestions by opposition politician Kenneth Jeyaretnam that there must have been some preferential treatment or corruption that allowed them to live in those bungalows.

The PM and Minister Teo were two of the three senior political office holders who made ministerial statements in Parliament on 3 July laying out the facts and circumstances for how the rentals were managed. They made the case that no preferential treatment was afforded to the ministers with reference to policies at the material time, the administrative processes involved, and comparisons of rental rates as well as state expenditure on making these properties habitable

for tenants with those of other state properties in the vicinity.

This was quickly followed by news on 12 July that PM Lee had asked Minister of Transport S Iswaran to take a leave of absence to assist CPIB in a case it had uncovered when it was investigating a separate issue.

It was later made known that property tycoon and chairman of the Singapore Grand Prix that presents the annual Formula 1 car race, Ong Beng Seng, had been arrested just as Minister Iswaran had been and was likewise assisting CPIB. He was to provide information about his interactions with the minister. Unlike the issue of the Ridout bungalows, CPIB had approached PM Lee to authorise the investigation, suggesting therefore that there was a prima facie case for further investigations into the dealings of Iswaran and Ong.

By these, one is reminded of an earlier controversy around how six former senior management staff from a government-linked company, Keppel Offshore & Marine (KOM) Limited, received stern warnings from CPIB after it was unable to find sufficient evidence to establish a prosecutable case for corruption by its officers.

In the parliamentary debate on 6 February 2023 on the matter, members of parliament (MPs) reflected Singaporeans' incredulity with this outcome. From what the informed public understood, in 2017, KOM had paid a fine of US\$422 million to resolve charges relating to corruption in Brazil brought by the legal authorities in the US, Brazil and Singapore, which KOM's subsidiary in the US and one officer of the firm pleaded guilty to.



It was explained in Parliament that there had simply not been enough evidence for CPIB and the Attorney-General's Office to mount a credible prosecution without the right to access necessary witnesses in this extra-territorial case. Nonetheless, the public was primed to debate the issues of integrity in government and its related organisations for what was to follow later in the year.

Building trust

What are the effects of these on Singapore's reputation for honest government? What perspectives and considerations should they raise for strengthening political governance as we look ahead?

The first concerns the codes of conduct that political leaders, both ministers and MPs of the governing People's Action Party, have to abide by. The Ridout bungalows controversy was a reminder that the issues of actual as well as perceived conflicts of interest, as cautioned against in the codes, matter. At the moment, the PM vouches for the integrity of his members. How can this regime be strengthened? What are the advantages as well as disadvantages of doing that?

In the Parliamentary clarifications to the ministerial statements on the rental of the

bungalows, members of the House mentioned that even if there had been no wrongdoing by the letter of the law, had there been a perception of it since the Law Minister had asked the Deputy Secretary of his ministry for the list of black and white bungalows that were available for rent. There was also quite simply the optics of the conflict of interest with ministers renting state property, and more so, the Law Minister renting it from a statutory body, Singapore Land Authority (SLA), within his purview.

Spirit of the law

While SM Teo noted that the Law Minister had taken pains to recuse himself from decisions on the transaction with the SLA that managed the rental and therefore seemed to have acted to uphold the spirit of the law, opposition MPs felt that there was still a problem with the optics of these transactions.

Learning how seriously the public takes these matters, PM Lee said that while he saw nothing wrong with ministers renting state properties, to prevent conflicts of interest, all public servants who have access to or are involved in leasing government property or valuation matters will soon have to declare their interests before they can rent such properties managed by their agencies.

This would mean that officers in organisations with access to privileged information or who can influence the outcomes of decisions will have to declare that before they can rent government properties under their purview. The PM will review the declarations required for property transactions for ministers and MPs from the People's Action Party.

Second, should these remain codes, or should they be law? For instance, should there be systems of independent offices that people of political significance in government, the public service, legal service and armed forces declare their interests to?

Statutory declarations of interests can be made on a regular basis to an independent body that records the necessary information, as one route to strengthen the system. But this agency should also proactively check for conflicts when individuals of political standing make transactions with the state, for the state, and/or advocate for interests in government or Parliament.

It would provide administrative support for an ongoing effort to monitor actual conflicts of interest. It would also keep this information strictly confidential, only to be accessed by a duly authorised investigative and legal agency or agencies if they are satisfied that there is cause.

Given that Singapore has a long-standing reputation for good governance and a very low rate of corruption even by integrity watchdog Transparency International, such an enhancement of the system, costly and cumbersome it may be, is well-aligned to its national ideals of honesty, fairness and justice. (See box, "Singapore Ranked

5th Least Corrupt Country in TI Corruption Perceptions Index 2022").

Raising awareness

Third, the values that undergird these codes and the propagation of the details of the codes are intertwined. There are no formal training or educational processes for these regarding elected political office holders, or prospective leaders who may begin as grassroots leaders in the People's Association system. There is no programme like the Governance for Good Alliance's Accreditation Framework for Directors recently launched by the Singapore Institute of Directors such that political leaders can attend to ensure that they understand and make an informed commitment to upholding these codes of conduct or any further rules to foster honest government that may be introduced.

Fourth, SM Teo stated in his report on the rental of the state properties that "[m]aintaining high standards of integrity and accountability in government and nationally demands constant effort...it depends on a citizenry which upholds incorruptibility as a core value, and social norms which do not tolerate lower standards."

As more Singaporean workers in the ranks of middle and senior management are exposed to the standards and processes of disclosure, the consciousness around "the correct thing to do" will rise, and tolerance for real or perceived conflicts of interest will fall. More will understand and be prepared to blow the whistle when they witness others acting in compromising ways. This is not just good for the corporate sector but political governance.

Fifth, the system of the Elected President is a critical part of this national system of integrity.

Singapore Ranked 5th Least Corrupt Country in TI Corruption Perceptions Index 2022

The Transparency International (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2022 has ranked Singapore as the 5th least corrupt country in the world out of 180 countries with a score of 83. Singapore continues to remain the only Asian country ranked in the top 10.

The TI-CPI ranks and measures countries by their perceived levels of public sector corruption. The 2022 index draws upon 13 expert assessments and surveys of business people. Countries are then scored on a scale of zero, for highly corrupt, to 100, for very clean. TI's 2022 report urged countries to continue the fight against corruption as it is both a key cause and result of the deteriorating global peace.

The corruption situation in Singapore remains firmly under control. The annual corruption statistics released by the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) in 2022 indicated that public sector corruption cases have remained consistently low.

Singapore has also performed well across international indices for incorruptibility and clean public sector. The Political and Economic Risk Consultancy ranked Singapore as the least corrupt country in its 2022 Report on Corruption in Asia out of 16 economies, a position held since 1995. In the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2022, Singapore was ranked 3rd for absence of corruption, the top Asian nation out of 140 countries ranked.

Domestically, results from the CPIB's recent Public Perception Survey conducted in 2022 indicated strong public confidence in national corruption control efforts. In the biennial survey of over 1,000 respondents in Singapore, 96 per cent rated Singapore's corruption control efforts to be effective, an improvement from 94 per cent in 2020. Political will, heavy punishment for corruption offences, and a zero-tolerance culture for corruption were the top three most important factors contributing to Singapore's low corruption rate.

This year's election is a reminder of that. It was conceived to block the ability of a "rogue government" from squandering the country's savings overnight. The mandate from a direct election would also allow the president to veto the appointments of people to the top posts in the legal, defence, and financial state institutions.

Strengthening the system for the declaration of interests can also provide the necessary information by which the Elected President

can exercise their role as a backstop to integrity in government, ensuring that good people committed to public service and the national interest lead key state institutions and related organisations.

As a new generation of leaders takes over in the governing party as well as opposition ones, including that of the leading Workers' Party, these are opportunities to further institutionalise a national political culture that has led to the country's success and development. ■