

DELAYING LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS IS UNACCEPTABLE Press statement by Kua Kia Soong, SUARAM Adviser 6 August 2018.

Ever since local elections were suspended in 1965 during the Confrontation crisis with the assurance that they would be restored as soon as peace was declared, the Alliance and then the BN failed for 53 years to do so. Now the PH government are dragging their feet over bringing back elected local government. It was clear that the Alliance and later the BN opted for the convenience of appointing their own political party cronies as councillors rather than risk the uncertainties of democratic elections. Since 2008, the PH government has been following suit in the states they control, namely, Selangor and Penang. This temptation for any ruling coalition is certainly strong for the local tiers of government have been seen as the launch pad for political party appointees as well as their NGO allies all these years.

During the ten years of PH rule in the states of Selangor and Penang, polls could have been held unofficially with the support of civil society and without requiring the Election Commission. But political party appointments provide the convenience of perpetuating patterns of patronage. The periodic outbursts of discontent by those party leaders and NGO activists who were overlooked are symptoms of this unhealthy party appointment system.

We can't afford to run local council elections?

Elected local government is not some futuristic hope that only first world countries can afford. The new Housing and Local Government Minister, Zuraida Kamaruddin has said that local council elections MIGHT be implemented within three years. She said the Pakatan Harapan federal government had arrived at the three-year target as it needed to give priority to other important matters such as ensuring the country was in a stable financial position.

So, Malaysians, it looks as though the questionable "RM1 trillion national debt" is now being used also as an excuse to put off the promised local council elections in the PH manifesto...

This justification for putting off holding local council elections is laughable when we bear in mind that even before we became independent, we had our very first democratic election - the Kuala Lumpur Municipal Elections of 1952. It was the first step we took on the way to self-government. At Independence, we continued this commitment to local government elections because appointments to political office were seen as a colonial practice. This is remarkable considering how economically poor we were at Independence compared to our economy today. One would expect that as our society becomes more mature in the "new" Malaysia, democratic principles of accountability at the local community level would be considered the highest of priorities and the new normal.

Local government elections detrimental to race relations?

On 8 April 2017, Dr Mahathir was reported to say that he was not in favour of local council elections, fearing that it would polarise the different races in the country even further. His reasoning was that since most of the ethnic Chinese were residing in the urban areas, while a majority of the Malays were in rural areas, if local council elections were held, this would see urbanites governed by one race, while another race would be managing the rural areas.

In fact, during the early years of independence, the Barisan Nasional was reluctant to have local council elections because many local council elections in the towns and cities tended to be won by the opposition. During the Sixties, many towns and cities were run by the Socialist Front. This was the real reason for not wanting local elections and not because of the so-called "racial divide". Anyway, Dr Mahathir now heads the old "opposition", so there is no reason to fear such competition.

Furthermore, non-partisan local government is neither unique nor inconceivable. Local government in Malaya before 1960 was conducted without parties. Many cities around the world, including, for example, some of the largest in the United States such as Los Angeles and Chicago, have non-partisan elections for their city councillors. There is no reason why race and religion should dominate rather than a healthy focus on the welfare and demands of ratepayers.

I have often stressed the fact that elected local government can at a stroke, depoliticise education in Malaysia simply by building schools based on need of the local communities and not treated like a political football during general elections by the Education Ministry. Few Malaysians have noticed, for example, that the all-important role of local education authorities in the Education Act 1961 is no longer mentioned in the new Education Act 1996. Local education authorities serve to allocate funds and other facilities to needy sectors and can serve to dissipate politicisation of education.

Local government elections long overdue

In the democratic tradition, taxation cannot be justified without representation. Ratepayers must be represented on the governing body which determines how that money is to be spent. This is a fundamental precept of parliamentary governance which is critically applicable at local-level government. It is to satisfy the requirement in a democratic society for greater pluralism, participation and responsiveness.

The Royal Commission of Enquiry into the Workings of Local Authorities in West Malaysia led by Senator Datuk Athi Nahappan recommended the return of elected local government. Their recommendation was not carried out by the BN government and it proved to be the start of a disgraceful habit by the BN to ignore RCI recommendations.

If we hold fast to the time-honoured concept of "no taxation without representation", nominated local government undermines the legitimacy of local authorities to collect assessment rates which are the most important source of income of the local authorities. That is why the Royal Commission Report concluded that the merits of elected local government with all its inherent weaknesses outweigh those of the nominated ones.

Malaysians are no longer prepared to put up with negligence or irresponsibility. Residents whose voices objecting to crass so-called "development" projects have been ignored, are demanding that their voices be heard at the local council. In this sense we can see why local authorities are considered the primary units of government. Many services including education, housing, health and transportation require local knowledge and can be better coordinated and more efficiently implemented through the local authority. Finally, we find that in the modern state, many social groups such as women and manual workers are grossly under-represented and local government can provide them with the channels to air their concerns and to participate in decision making. Generally speaking, bottom up local level participation is vital to ensure voters are able to influence decisions.

So please Pakatan, don't tell us we can't have local government elections now because there is no money in the coffers. You simply cannot renege on this election promise. That is totally unacceptable and definitely not an option!