

**Thorny embrace of NGOs, local councils?**  
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The dissatisfaction with the quota for NGO representation in the local councils in Selangor exposes the challenges citizens encounter in seeking fundamental reforms to the decision-making processes of government.

Following the astounding election success of opposition parties in the 2008 general election, the opposition-led states of Penang and Selangor initiated more open engagement with non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Since 2008, NGOs began to play more prominent roles in these states. Penang and Selangor recognised NGOs' right to representation in local councils.

penang local council election NGOs are constitutive organisations and importantly, they complement electorate representation. NGOs do not have to compete for votes and being free from such constraints allows them to act without fear or favour in the aspects of good governance such as democratisation, decentralisation and monitoring to right wrongs (perceived or otherwise) and prevent abuses.

But are NGOs free of political influence? The Coalition of NGO and Professionals Appointed Councillors (Conpac) and the Coalition for Good Governance (CGG) are now unhappy that there has been a reduction in NGO and professional representation in Selangor for 2010.

Conpac and CGG claim that NGOs linked to political parties have taken the positions in local councils previously held by NGOs not linked to political entities.

The two coalitions in a memorandum this week to the Selangor government have raised issues and concerns on the politics of citizen representation in local councils.

NGOs are calling for a level playing field for NGO representation in the decision-making body of local authorities which is the full council made up of the president or mayor and councillors. Major decisions such as passing of annual budgets, enacting by-laws and approving planning permits are made in the full council meetings.

Room for mistakes, temptation

Local authorities are empowered by the Local Government Act of 1976. However, Kuala Lumpur City Hall, Kota Kinabalu City Hall, Putra Jaya and Pasir Gudang are governed by special enactments.

As there are no local government elections in Malaysia, the presidents, mayors and councillors are appointed by the state governments. The decisions of the state executive council are absolute. They do not have to consult the federal government or the minister in charge of local government on the appointments of local councillors.

The Act states that 'councillors shall be appointed from amongst persons the majority of whom shall be persons ordinarily resident in the local authority area who in the opinion of the state authority have wide experience in local government affairs or have achieved distinction in any profession, commerce or industry or who are otherwise capable of representing the interests of their community in the local area (Section 10 (2)).'

shah alam and subang jaya council In the past, almost all councillors were members or supporters of political parties from the ruling coalition. Some faithful party members have been reappointed as councillors for 20 years, states Dr Goh Ban Lee, a local council expert. Most of the presidents or mayors were senior federal government officers.

The NGOs are right in raising concerns on the appointments of councillors linked to political parties. If the majority of councillors are from political parties in power, will decisions, for example on major privatisation projects be influenced by gains for politicians and parties in power? Large privatisation projects provide room for mistakes and temptation particularly in the procurement of goods and services.

NGOs have highlighted that local authorities lack expertise in a range of areas such as planning, budgeting etc. Should local councils appoint professionals like accountants, lawyers and architects as councillors for sourcing of expertise?

Will experts be a voice for just societies and communities? During a visit to Toronto several years ago, I asked a Canadian friend the reason for the clean air, greenery and effective services despite the modernisation. He responded that Canadians had to thank the citizens of the 1970s who pioneered citizen leadership that ensured Canadians would enjoy a quality of life for generations to come.

New kind of citizen leadership

Just imagine if about two decades ago, many Malaysian expert professionals had come together to do something about corrupt politicians, pollution, crime, campaign for local government elections etc, today our urban centres would not be choked with cars, concrete buildings and polluted air. Our rivers, lakes and seas would give us untainted fish and be safe for swimming. We would have access to clean water direct from our taps.

However , it needs to be recognised that a small number of professionals have given their time and wealth of skills without being councillors.

NONESo who do NGOS represent in local councils? NGOs certainly do not represent themselves. NGOS represent multiple stakeholders who have multiple needs. NGOs give a voice to those who are excluded and under-represented. NGOs represent consumers, senior citizens, the mentally and physically challenged, communities etc.

NGOs provide expertise and a different perspective to issues like environment, transport and other basic needs of communities which fall within the domain of local authorities. NGOs are committed to the development of just societies..

NGOs are accountable to their organisations and their stakeholders who give them the legitimacy and an authoritative voice.

With a new kind of citizen leadership emerging that seeks legitimate roles in government decision-making processes, there is a need for a new kind of leadership at government levels. The new political leadership must recognise that citizens have the right to credible representation through non-political channels like civil society groups.

It is important too that other citizens support civil society sectors who work in contested spaces and through thorny terrain to influence government institutions like local authorities for the just needs of people and communities.

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