

Cleaning up the local councils
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Greater civil society participation and not local government elections is needed to fight graft in local councils, according to architect and urban planner Lim Chong Keat.

"If you have local government elections, you will get the same machinery that coerced you into accepting whoever they want to place," he said.

Speaking at a dialogue at the Bar Council Auditorium in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday, he said there must be an examination on the process of change towards being a well-governed country.

The dialogue titled 'Planning Law - Corruption, Accountability and Transparency in Local City Councils?' was organised by Youth For Change and the Bar Council Young Lawyers Committee.

Lim pointed out that it is better to make the present Act work by instilling a sense of honour and to de-politicise the Local Government Act.

"In the best democratic examples, local governments are meant to be free from the machinations of provincial state authorities," he said.

"Where in the Local Government Act, is the word political party ever mentioned?" he added.

Lim (photo) called on "enterprising lawyers" to challenge the appointment of those on political grounds.

"No, it's not in contradiction of the spirit of the nomination act," he said.

"In other case, you don't need to go for elections if you want to condemn the powers that be because it is the state that appoints them. So, if you're unhappy with the people that they appoint, your political action should be addressed at the state level," he added.

Financial audit

Lim felt that the other important aspect which must be queried is the financial audit of the local authorities.

"The local authorities must present their accounts to the public, to the ratepayers," he said, adding that the authorities never do this.

During a question and answer session later, lawyer Derek John Fernandez said Malaysia needs accountable people in the local councils.

"People have no voice absolutely in an appointed system. So, certainly elections are the way to go," he said (photo).

Citing several examples, the lawyer said corruption here is "not localised" but "almost institutionalised."

"As you move higher and higher, you begin to realize how farcical the system is and how the system breeds corruption. It becomes a way of life. It becomes (like) almost something must be done in order for the so-called development to take place," he said.

'Negotiated tender'

Meanwhile, Deputy Editor of The Sun, R Nadeswaran, who was one of the speakers, highlighted a new term called "negotiated tender" and spoke of a council president who believes in this practice.

"The moment he (the president) puts out a tender, he said that he'll get phone calls from the kuncu-kuncu (cliques) from the menteri besar's office in the case of Selangor. Then, he gets phone calls from the exco members in charge of the local councils and every local Umno leader," he said.

According to Nadeswaran, the council president reasoned that it was better to negotiate with a contractor who has a good track record rather than letting those with bad track records obtain the tender.

However, Nadeswaran disagreed with this practice.

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