



Do Local Authorities Serve the People?

If local councils are failing to carry out their duties efficiently, then why should they exist in the first place, especially since their rudimentary roles can be played by others?

ONCE again, local authorities are hogging the headlines for all the wrong reasons.

Allegations of their gross inefficiency, abuse of power, corrupt practices and poor planning are always highlighted in the local dailies. But when Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk M Kayveas launched a scathing attack on local councils recently, it created plenty of lively debate.

Not surprisingly, Kayveas received widespread support for his comments from ratepayers, while most councillors vehemently denied the allegations. The Deputy Minister had alleged that most councillors were merely rubber stamps and even said local councils were being run like secret societies with no transparency. Delays in approvals, corruption and poor service seem to be the main grouses

The overwhelming support for Kayveas' comments is a sad reflection of what ratepayers think of their local councils and the extent to which their level of service has sunk.

Ever since local council elections were abolished in 1970, the performance of local councils - the district councils, municipal councils or city halls - seems to have deteriorated significantly. Part of the reason is that local councillors know that they cannot be voted out by ratepayers if they failed to perform well.

So, rather than serve the *rakyat*, many prefer to appease their political masters who had appointed them. Like Federal and State Ministers, local councillors too are appointed based on their political affiliation and their popularity within their party hierarchy.

To make matters worse, no opposition party members are usually appointed councillors, unlike Parliament or State Assemblies where they are voted in.

Local government is regarded as the third level of government, after the State and Federal Governments. But the pressing question is, do we really need this third level of government?

If local councils are failing to carry out their duties efficiently, then why should they exist in the first place? Do we need them merely to collect taxes?

Why can't state assemblymen carry out the duties of local councillors? In fact, we often see the *rakyat* resorting to their state assemblymen when they have grouses rather than their local councillors.

Perhaps, the time has come to seriously examine the role of local councils. A thorough study should be conducted to examine their roles, responsibilities, functions and relevance in today's environment.

Do the benefits outweigh the drawbacks or vice versa? Let us look at some of the more common grouses that regularly appear in the local Press:

- Local councillors interfering with the due process of the law. Being politicians, they often seek to speak up for their supporters even if they break the law.
- Councillors often indulge in wasteful overseas trips, often under the guise of 'study trips'. These are a waste of taxpayers' money and are tantamount to nothing more than a fully-paid holiday.
- Local authorities often add to red tape or are a duplication of the approval process. For example, quit rent is collected by the Land Office and assessment by the local councils. Similarly, land and strata titles are issued by the Land Office while certificates of fitness (CFs) are issued by local councils.

At a time when the government is trying to reduce red tape and increase efficiency, we should be studying ways to reduce costs and wasteful duplication.

Just look at the city of Kuala Lumpur. Why do we need both a mayor and Federal Territories Minister? And what role does the Housing & Local Government play? Isn't this a waste of taxpayers' money?

The truth is, many local government tasks can, in fact, be carried out by the relevant government departments and agencies. All it needs is a streamlining of the functions, duties and responsibilities of those concerned.

We already have Members of Parliament and state assemblymen addressing the grouses of the people. After all, if they are doing their jobs efficiently, there will be little need for the *rakyat* to turn to local councillors. **mb**

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