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THE SUN

DATE: 16 / 08 / 2007

The heyday of local councils

The Sun - 16/8/2007

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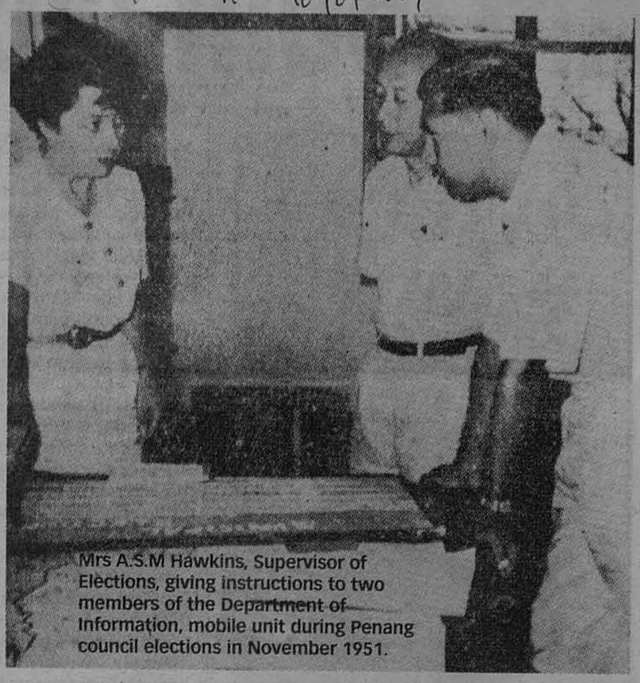

Mrs A.S.M Hawkins, Supervisor of Elections, giving instructions to two members of the Department of Information, mobile unit during Penang council elections in November 1951.

IN February, 1972, then prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein told Parliament: "The people at the grassroots level want services, and if the government can give them efficient, honest services, I think the people should be happy, and this is what we intend to do."

He was defending the proposal to abolish local government elections.

Consequently, the 1976 Local Government Act, which provided for councillors and presidents or mayors to be appointed, came into being.

It is useful to look back to the heyday of local government, focusing on George Town and Ipoh, when councillors and presidents/mayors were elected.

The concept of elected representatives in the government was introduced in George Town as early as 1856, some 151 years ago.

Although George Town's partial local government elections were abandoned in 1913, they were reintroduced in 1951. Interestingly, among the nine elected councillors was a woman lawyer, and according to the now defunct *The Straits Echo*, "None of the candidates owe their selection to racial support of any section of the community."

In December 1956, George Town had the distinction of having the first fully elected council with the Alliance, the predecessor to the Barisan Nasional, in control. However, from December 1957 to 1966, George Town City Council – the town was declared a city on Jan 1, 1957 – was ruled by the Labour Party and later, the Socialist Front. The city council was taken over by the Alliance state government in 1966.

Under the Socialist Front, the George Town City Council was somewhat ideological. For instance, it gave owner-occupied property owners 50% rebate on assessment rates.

The city council also refused to celebrate Malaysia Day in 1963, claiming it was a form of neo-colonialism. The Alliance state government had to direct the state secretary to temporarily take over the council and use its funds to put up bunting and flags.

Hence, it was not surprising – because the Socialist Front city council was a thorn in the side of the Alliance state government – that when there were complaints of corruption, a commission was instituted to enquire into the council's affairs.

But although the commission heard cases of questionable practices, it found no specific case of malpractice.

In general, despite complaints, the George Town City Council did a reasonably good job. To quote Prof M. Norris, "The George Town council overall, carried out its wide responsibilities with efficiency in a demanding urban situation." Back then, council services included mother and child clinics, piped water, electricity, sewage management and public transportation.

Ipoh had partial local government elections in July, 1954. In May, 1962, the council became fully elected.

From the onset of local council elections in Ipoh, the Ipoh Municipal Council was under the control of the Perak Progressive Party which later became known as the Peoples' Progressive Party (PPP).

SUNDAY GAZETTE, NOVEMBER 25, 1951

Penang's Second Election

In Half A Century

STORY BY V. R. COOMARASAMY

Despite being under the opposition PPP, the council had good relations with the Alliance state government in Perak.

Equally important, the municipal council under D. S. Seenivasagam's leadership was a shining example of good governance. Ipoh was noted not only for its leaders' integrity, but also for excellent management. It was the country's cleanest town.

Hence, when in the 1960s and 1970s, state governments began taking over the administration of state capitals on charges of poor management or insolvency, Ipoh was unaffected.

Until 1960, local council candidates were prohibited from using party symbols to minimise party politics. Instead, they used symbols determined by drawing lots, such as an umbrella, a top and a bunch of keys. Hence, election campaigns, apart from promoting the candidate, also focused on making voters remember the right symbols.

On March 2, 1965, local government elections for the whole country were suspended. The reason given was the "Confrontation" initiated by Indonesia. The government promised to restore local elections "the moment peace is declared and the emergency regulations are withdrawn."

However, the real reason for the suspension, according to most writers, was the growing support for opposition parties in some state capitals and the bigger towns, despite clear cases of poor administration.

A Royal Commission of Inquiry to Investigate into the Workings of Local Authorities in West Malaysia was set up in July, 1965. The report of the royal commission is popularly known as the Athi Nahappan Report, after its chairman, Senator Datuk Athi Nahappan.

Among other things, it called for local government elections. But the government has ignored the recommendation.

After having about 30 years of appointed local councils, it is clear the promise of efficient and honest service has not been kept.

Although there are Malaysians who push for elected local governments on the "no taxation without representation" principle, many would be satisfied with good municipal services, with or without elections.

Hence, if the government does not want to bring back elections, it should at least keep its promise on efficient and honest services by local authorities.

Dr Goh Ban Lee is a Penang-based retired academic interested in urban governance, housing and urban planning. He writes a fortnightly column, Local Counsel, for *theSun*.