

RECENTLY, a debate erupted as to whether the Mayor, or Datuk Bandar, of Kuala Lumpur should be elected by ratepayers or appointed by the government, as is the case now. It is an interesting debate not because it involves the largest city in the country, but because it highlights the poor service that an appointed Mayor provides to the public.

While Kuala Lumpur City Hall and other local councils are entrusted with keeping the cities and districts clean, there are accusations that they are plagued by inefficiency, corruption, lack of transparency and poor enforcement.

Often, we read in the Press about how local council chiefs have become 'Little Napoleons' when it comes to attending to public complaints. Bureaucratic red tape has become so bad that the media now airs grievances faster than the councils can acknowledge them.

Recent examples include privatising of services, outdoor advertising, late issuance of CF (certificate of fitness) and the opening of a museum without CF approval. In fact, it is shocking how some of the local councils 'get away with murder', so to speak.

Punishment, if any, is often lukewarm. Council staff are merely reassigned or reprimanded if the fault is ever traced to them. If not, well, just deny responsibility and try to lay the blame on someone else.

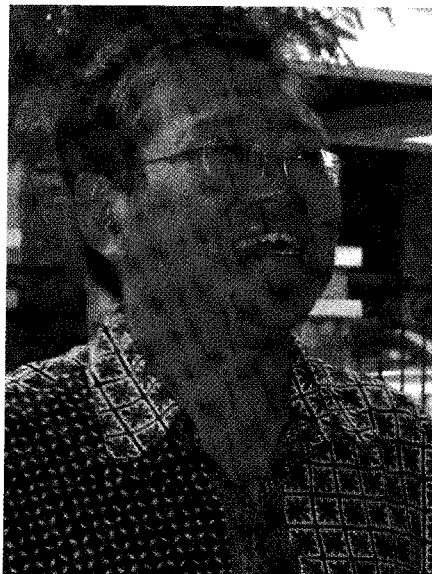
Given this situation, it may now no longer be a question of whether we should bring elections back to local councils, but whether local councils themselves should be abolished.

In short, there is a growing view that local authorities are one tier of government we can do without. After all, aren't Members of Parliament and State Assemblymen also responsible for addressing the needs of the people? Since local councils are becoming more and more controversial these days, wouldn't it be better to just abolish them and save taxpayers' money?

State Assemblyman for Subang Jaya, Datuk Lee Hwa Beng, insists that local councils serve a purpose as they provide essential services to the people. While acknowledging there are

Rapping Local Councils

Local councils have been taking flak lately for alleged abuses of power. Among the remedial measures suggested are the appointment of politicians as council heads, reintroduction of local government elections, and even the scrapping of local councils. Are these really the answer? ■ By Heikal Abdul Mutadir



Lee: Says local councils are the governmental administration that is closest to the public



Lim: Local council chiefs are often only obligated to those who appointed them

problems, he feels abolishing these councils would not be the answer.

'The abolishment would result in direct ruling by the state government. This would create more difficulty for the public as the state level is often more difficult to reach,' he says, adding that local councils are the governmental administration that is closest to the public.

'If local councils were abolished, the state government wouldn't be able to know what was happening on the ground. At the local council level, there would be town planners and others who create a proper network in running a city and such,' he says.

Some feel local councillors only answer to their political masters and not taxpayers. Inevitably, opposition parties too fail to get

WHITHER LOCAL COUNCILS?

For	Against
They provide a link between the government and the public	They are plagued by inefficiencies, weak enforcement and corruption
They give the state government a better view of what is happening at the local level	They require extra expenditure funded by taxpayers' money
They take care of day-to-day, localised complaints	There is lack of transparency as the public cannot view the decision-making process.

representation on local councils in the absence of elections.

Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang feels local council chiefs are often only obligated to those who appointed them. 'With nominated councillors, they are answerable only to their parties and not the ratepayers.' This, says the Democratic Action Party stalwart, is the fundamental flaw in the current governmental system.

But Lim admits that even in the elected systems, there remain problems of abuses by council staff and councillors.

In Malaysia, there are three basic tiers of governing structure. The structure used to be categorised by elections at the parliamentary, state and local governance levels. However, elections at the local governance level were abolished in the late Sixties following the recommendations of the Nahappan Report.

Lim believes that by restoring elections to the third tier of governance, the country would be able to improve local council responsiveness to the public. He says there is a serious lack of transparency in local councils due to the fact that the officials do not have democratic credibility.

'There used to be a provision whereby local council meetings should be conducted in public but now, the sub-committee makes decisions and the public is often left out,' he says.

Compounding the problem is the fact that some councils have tried to privatise their services for quick gains. When it is perceived that public concerns are overridden by private interest, one can expect an erosion of faith in the authorities.

On views that local councils be abolished, Lim says doing so would only create a different set of problems. Ratepayers would have to deal directly with the offices of the

Menteris Besar or Chief Ministers. This could create further lack of accountability as the responsibilities would be passed around, making them more vulnerable to manipulation.

One member of the government

who has been quite vocal in criticising local councils is Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk M Kayveas. He once caused an uproar by referring to local councils as 'secret societies'. He claimed councillors were known to 'keep to themselves' and were reluctant to expose any wrongdoings, resulting in incidents of



Kuala Lumpur City Hall's response to a Malaysian Business article on an illegal furniture mall

corruption going unreported. Also, he alleged that some local council were wasting ratepayers' money by spending unnecessarily on things such as 'study trips' that were in effect state-sponsored holidays.

Recently, there was a debate as to whether the Mayor's post in Kuala Lumpur should be held by a civil servant or a politician. Ironically, one argument put forward was that a civil servant would not be responsive to the needs of the citizens but a politician would.

To this, Lee explains that local councillors are sometimes also State Assemblymen and therefore, if they want to get re-elected at the state level, they would have to perform

at the local council level.

For the record, there is a Federal Territories Minister who oversees the various federal territories in the country such as Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya.

Indeed, the barrage of criticism levelled at Kuala Lumpur City Hall has intensified of late and the complaints and issues brought up by the Press seem to indicate a lack of monitoring on the part of City Hall. Often, there is a tendency to pass the buck to other government departments, or lethargy in taking action.

In fact, **Malaysian Business** recently highlighted the case of a huge illegal furniture mall in an advanced state of construction in the city but all City Hall could say was that a stop-order notice had been issued several times. At the time of writing, construction was still going on.

So are our laws insufficient or is it a question of poor enforcement? After all, compared to other cities of the world and Asia, Kuala Lumpur is relatively small. Yet, Kuala Lumpur City Hall is unable to get its act together as frequent floods and traffic jams plague the city centre.

Proponents of local councils say local authorities are still needed as they enable the public to identify parties responsible for day-to-day localised issues such as clogged drains and rubbish collection.

'If local councils were abolished, the public would be at a loss as they would not know who was responsible for what. The local council is a link through which the public and the government can communicate,' says Lee. Personally though, he says he prefers elections rather than appointments, but says he will adhere to his party's views.

On cases where councillors are also contractors or developers, Lee says they cannot be prevented from doing business. However, they should declare their business interests.

Perhaps at the end of the day, what is important is that the grievances of ratepayers are addressed in an effective manner. At the moment, that does not seem to be happening in a good number of councils.

Until and unless there is more accountability and improvement, ratepayers will continue to push for local council elections if not the abolishment of local councils altogether. **mb**