

Democracy means term limits for elected officials — Kua Kia Soong

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MARCH 31 — As the 14th Malaysian general election looms, it is almost comical to see ageing politicians still trying to justify their “right” to stand for elections even while they clamour for “change” in the political order.

They cite political conspiracies by their political opponents to justify hogging their electoral seats. Some have been in Parliament since the era of the Tunku — half a century ago! During that time, Umno (hardly the paragon of democracy) has changed party leaders five times!

It is no coincidence that these long term political leaders exert control over their respective political parties to ensure all prospective party candidates is beholden to them. They argue that they are indispensable and even justify their right to selectively hold both federal as well as state seats.

The late Karpal Singh was a stern opponent of this grabby practice by established party leaders of hogging federal as well as state seats. His famous line when a former DAP stalwart left the party was: “No one is indispensable.” That surely applies to everyone in the world. Or are some people exempt from this mortal truism?

Why are term limits vital for democracy?

Clearly, many Malaysians still do not appreciate the meaning of democracy. During the historic Paris Commune of 1871, elected officials were subject to immediate recall. In ancient Greece more than 2,000 years ago, many offices were term limited so as to limit the power of individuals, a practice that was seen as vital for the greater good of society.

Even in other democratic countries, we see responsible and honourable politicians resign at the slightest failure of judgement on their part or when their term has reached a convenient point for some other younger leader to take over the party.

Many modern republics employ term limits for their highest offices. The United States place a limit of two terms on its presidency while some state governors and state legislators also have term limits. The Russian Federation likewise limits the head of state to two terms; any further terms cannot be consecutive.

The democratic justification for this term limit is simply that elected officials can over time obtain too much power or authority and thus makes them less representative of all the citizens. The democratic principle behind term limit is that no one person should have too much power nor for too long. The concept of term limits minimises the amount of power any one person can gain over a period of time.

Preventing chances of corruption

As we have seen only recently, even within the two-term service, corporate interests including those in property and finance can provide inducements to the incumbent especially when they have developed familiar relations over time.

There is clearly a correlation between the length of time a politician serves and the degree to which he/she has opportunities to engage in corruption. The principle of term limits has always been applied to the civil service which is why civil servants and police personnel are transferred every so often to prevent the acquisition of power and inducements to corruption in any one post.

Term limits would make this less likely since there is less time that a politician can be influenced by the power of the office that they hold. Corporate interests cannot become as entrenched when term limits are in place. With term limitations, corporate influence still happens, but not to the extent that it can when such interests develop unhealthy relationships with career politicians who are in office for a long time.

Preventing careerism

In a democracy, elected representatives are supposed to represent the interests of the citizens. As most politicians will tell us when they are interviewed, their work is supposed to be a service to society as a whole.

Being a Member of Parliament or State Representative is not a profession even though it has become a career for many people. In fact, elected officials should operate on the understanding that they are only serving the people for a period of time until it is someone else's turn.

Term limits ensure that their representatives focus more on representing the public than on hogging the office and power.

Providing leadership opportunities for others

Democracy and organisational development are about providing diverse opportunities to as many people as possible and especially to the young, women, indigenous people and the marginalized. In our society, there are so many individuals with untapped potential for leadership as if that is not clear for all to see.

In recent years, we have seen the surge of many young capable leaders in politics, including women from various ethnic origins.

Even the ancient sage Laozi could appreciate what true leadership is: "A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: We did it ourselves." Isn't this a far cry from the ageing leaders whose delusion of self-importance makes them cling to power?

Let's face it, the number of available seats in the federal parliament and state assemblies are strictly limited. To have served four terms in parliament is a reasonable limit and

allows new candidates to make themselves known to their constituents and have a go at representing the people.

Term limits will create the opportunity for younger people to get elected to public office. Modern society needs service-oriented young people in different elected positions, providing diversity and strength to the citizenry. A wider pool of candidates also gives voters a wider choice of new people and new dynamic ideas.

Overdue democratic reform for Malaysia

Thus, this democratic principle of term limits for elected officials is to ensure that no one person can hold a position of control or power for an indefinite period of time. This is also to allow and encourage more young people to have the opportunity to become leaders in the political process.

This urgent democratic reform for Malaysia should therefore limit the terms of ALL elected officials, namely, that of the prime minister, chief minister or menteri besar to two terms, and that of Members of Parliament and ADUNs to four terms.

** Press statement by Kua Kia Soong, Suaram adviser on March 31 2017*

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