S’poreans split on decision to allow in barred activists

While some praise the Govt for being flexible, others question about-turn

BY LYDIA LIM & KEITH LIN

SINGAPOREANS appear evenly divided over the Government’s handling of barred civil society activists who were told yesterday on the Government’s decision last Friday to admit civil society activists that it had earlier warned might not be able to enter the country.

The Government had earlier objected to 27 activists who were accredited by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank to attend their annual meetings here, citing security as well as law and order concerns.

But amid criticisms from the civil society organisations (CSOs) and World Bank organisers, it changed its position. It allowed 22 out of 27 in, and maintained that the remaining five could enter the country.

Around 23 of them welcomed the Government’s change in stance, saying it showed it was willing to listen and be flexible.

The other 22 questioned the about-turn. However, they were again split down the middle — one camp felt the Government should have stuck to its guns and the other side felt the activists should not have been barred in the first place.

Taxi driver Gregory Martin, 57, counts himself among those who are firmly behind the Government and its decision to change its earlier stance.

“It shows that this Government can be flexible and reasonable, but at the same time cautious. We’re a small country; we can’t afford to have too much trouble,” he said.

Investment manager Henry Toh, 31, agreed. “The Government is just adjusting to the feedback the ground has given. I’m quite happy it’s adopting this give-and-take approach.”

Businesswoman Zita Lee, 56, had a different view. She opposed the initial decision to blacklist 27 of the 790 activists who had registered to take part in the events here. “The Government should have let them come in and told them they could not do this or that. But you ban them and then let 22 of 27 come in...”

Unlike her, marketing executive Joon Sec, 27, supported the first decision to bar certain activists but was disappointed by what he saw as the Government’s inconsistency. He said: “It’s good to have a ban for security. If they want to make a stand, they should stick with it, and not just do a U-turn because of pressure.”

University lecturer Golam Ashraf, 30, who was born in Bangladesh but is now a Singapore citizen, said the CSO incident revealed a gap in understanding on what civic activism is about.

“There, we don’t have strikes and carnage on the streets, unlike in many democratic countries. People coming from the outside have a certain view of democracy, but just to stand there and protest does not imply its good democracy,” he said.

Still, Singapore’s tough stance and subsequent change of heart has had an impact on its citizens living abroad.

Mr Kwek Siong Chew, 38, a graduate student in economic development at a Washington university, thinks Singapore’s reputation has suffered as a result of the episode. It was widely reported in newspapers such as The Washington Post and The New York Times.

“As a nation, Singapore should have the right to assert itself,” Mr Kwek said. “I’m just wondering how this has been allowed to happen. If these activists are such dangerous people, why do we subsequently allow them to come in?”

But Member of Parliament Toh Ho Pin, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee on Home Affairs and Law, defended the authority’s initial cautious approach. “Our main concern is security,” he said.

He noted this was the first time Singapore was hosting a big international meeting of this nature and it lacked experience in handling CSOs from different countries. “So taking a cautious approach was correct. But as we move along, we see that these organisations have their own accreditation systems and willingness to let these groups come here to express their views.”

But former Nominated MP Braemu Mathi, who is active in civil society here, feels several questions remain unanswered.

She noted that Singapore is known for having tough laws on how CSOs can make themselves heard. “If the World Bank really felt that its discussion with CSOs was important, this should have been one of the top-most questions when it signed the agreement with Singapore in 2003. They should have cleared this up early,” she said.