S’pore’s public agencies ‘graft-free and fair’

But safeguards preferable in case of errant govt: Think-tank study

BY LYNN LEE

SINGAPORE’S public institutions are corruption-free, fair and efficient but more can be done to insulate them from any errant government in the future, says an independent think-tank here.

In a study commissioned by anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) said that the Republic deserves its reputation for being the least corrupt country in Asia.

“But this study goes further to look at the integrity of the system,” said SIIA chairman Simon Tay.

“And this system works, but as a whole, its design can be better.”

Citing the work of two key agencies, the study said that the Elections Department and the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) “set the right tone” for integrity.

Both agencies now report to the Prime Minister’s Office.

The CPIB does its work without fear. “The Singapore system strongly emphasises the investigation and prosecution of corruption cases, which are carried out independently and without fear, with the CPIB, Attorney-General’s Chambers and courts each professionally discharging their functions,” the SIIA report said.

“This is highlighted by a number of cases that have involved political leaders and Members of Parliament from the ruling party.”

But the SIIA believes that “in due course, it may be preferable to legislate formally the independent functions” of these key agencies.

“While this is not a complete safeguard against an errant government leadership, it would offer additional insulation,” it said in its study.

The study, called the National Integrity System (NIS), looks at how honest and upright the system is by focusing on key institutions and their integrity, transparency and accountability. It was one of 10 Asian country NIS studies commissioned by Transparency International.

Mr Tay, the lead researcher and former Nominated MP, suggested in an interview that in the case of the Elections Department, for example, independently elected people should oversee how elections are run.

Currently, the Elections Department, which does that job, is made up of civil servants.

Similarly for the CPIB, it could report to a board of qualified individuals instead of just one person, the Prime Minister. This board could be headed by an independently elected commissioner.

Enlarging the role of the media and civil society groups as watchdogs against graft, and making further efforts to discourage corruption regionally were two other key suggestions offered by the study.

For the study, the SIIA looked at, among other things, how laws are enforced and what guidelines civil servants and leaders followed in their behaviour.

“For example, one question we asked. Are the decisions they make affected by whether the person is a friend, or he has offered a bribe?” said Mr Tay.

Besides in-depth research, it conducted face-to-face and e-mail interviews with people from “less than a dozen” government agencies to get a sense of how things worked.

What it found, said Mr Tay, was that the concept of national integrity is “internalised and embedded” in how the country is governed and run. Beyond this, there is also emphasis on the values and codes of conduct that public officials and leaders have to follow.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan agreed with the study’s recommendations.

Singapore’s system of integrity relied heavily on having good men at the top who are committed to fighting corruption, said Mr Tan.

“But what happens if we have a moral deficit at that top? We would do well to have a fall-back system so that our governance system will...rest on a combination of good men, good rules, norms and values, and a steadfast commitment to continually enhance our national integrity system,” he added.

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