To resign or not, that’s the question S’poreans are asking

BY LA XUEYING

THE question of whether Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng should offer to resign cropped up among Singaporeans interviewed yesterday, on the disclosures in Parliament about terrorist leader Mas Selamat Kastari’s escape.

It emerged when some, such as medical practitioner Au Kah Kay, raised the issue of ministerial responsibility.

He argued that Mr Wong would have visited the Whitley Road Detention Centre as Home Affairs Minister and ought to have noticed potential security lapses.

Thus, Mr Wong should resign as he bore responsibility, "not by commission, but by omission", said Dr Au, 47.

Holding a similar view was writer Catherine Lim. She argued that given the "huge magnitude" of the lapses that enabled Mas Selamat to escape, Mr Wong’s resignation would be "the honourable thing" to do.

Whether or not Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong accepts it is another matter, she said.

An apology is not enough. You need a large symbolic gesture to match the enormity of the event, she added.

But businessman and former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharuddin said Mr Wong should resign only if he was "personally responsible" or had totally lost the public’s confidence.

“He should take some responsibility, sure, but resigning? That is not how you would run a government.”

Rebutting Dr Lim’s view, he added: “We have to be practical. On this issue, Mr Wong is precisely the best person to clean up, to continue the hunt for Mas Selamat. With his background, being in MHA (Ministry of Home Affairs) for so long, he will leave no stone unturned.”

In Parliament on Tuesday, PM Lee dismissed any suggestion that Mr Wong should resign. Singapore, he said, did not go for political expediency options but focused on solving the underlying problems.

While the minister is ultimately accountable for his ministry’s policies and operations, it “does not mean that if a lapse occurs down the line, every level in the chain of command, up to and including the minister, should automatically be punished or reprimanded”, Mr Lee said.

Instead, the Government has to investigate who was at fault and take disciplinary action accordingly.

Indeed Mr N. Silva, president of the Union of Security Employees, believes that the fault lies squarely at the door of the guards, not the Government.

“They had given (the guards) orders to look after this. It’s negligence on the part of those people,” he said.

Law academic Eugene Tan did not think there was a public clamour for Mr Wong’s resignation.

In his view, the “general unease and discomfort” among the public stemmed more from a fear that there could be “severe systemic weaknesses”.

If even a “top-notch, front-line agency” like the Internal Security Department could suffer such lapses, “it makes you wonder about the rest of the government agencies”, he argued.

Workers’ Party leader Low Thia Khiang, who was silent when PM Lee pointedly asked him in Parliament if he thought Mr Wong should resign, did not respond to similar questions from this paper on the issue.

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