Views aplenty, from ‘Govt should do more’ to ‘move on’

Netizens still abuzz over Govt’s response, but Singaporeans split over whether it has shown accountability

By Zakir Hussain

TWO days after details of Mas Selamat Kastari’s escape emerged, Singaporeans remain divided on whether the Government has demonstrated accountability over the incident.

Some continue to bay for blood, wanting a stronger apology and more concrete gestures of contrition.

Others are satisfied with the Government’s approach to accountability — a preference to solve the underlying problem rather than to go for politically easier options as in some other countries — blogger Alex Au insisted: “What’s wrong with appealing public anger? That’s what politics is about.”

To law academic Eugene Tan at the Singapore Management University (SMU), however, much of the anger is not really over the Mas Selamat escape per se.

The latter, he believes, has simply become a “lightning rod” for other issues.

In other words, when people vent anger over the escape, they are really venting anger over issues such as ministerial salaries and perceived government complacency.

Political watcher Viswa Sadasivan noted that in situations as politically fraught as the Mas Selamat escape, the tone of an apology matters.

“In situations like this, when explanations throw up more questions than answers, it is better if the leadership gives an apology, or makes an admission, without qualification,” he said.

He drew a parallel with Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean’s statement and apology in Parliament in 2003 — after a trainee commando died after being “dunked” in water during training — which “helped give closure to an equally sensitive, painful incident.”

The incident saw the top-ranking commando officer, a colonel, replaced. Four instructors were charged in court and later given jail terms of six months to a year.

Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng, who is also Home Affairs Minister, apologised for the Mas Selamat escape in Parliament on Feb 26.

This week, he also said the guards directly responsible had been replaced. More senior officers responsible would also face disciplinary action, although no criminal charges will be filed.

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies fellow Terence Chong, asked if he believed most Singaporeans were satisfied with the Government’s account, said: “I think they are. I am, at least.”

Others like Sengkang West grassroots leader Michael Chew, 47, felt there had been “a good degree of transparency” in the counting of the escape.

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How to convince Singaporeans

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For Institute of Policy Studies fellow Gillian Koh, “the challenge is for Singaporeans to be convinced that the lapses at the Whitley centre were not reflective of wider systemic problems within the Internal Security Department (ISD).”

She noted that public perception is that the ISD is accountable only to the Minister for Home Affairs. This, she feels, could be the reason for some of the strong public sentiment following the escape.

Assistant Professor Tan of SMU noted the Government needed to “replenish” the confidence that Singaporeans have in it.

“Lying low and being stingy with information” would not help, he said.

“It is a hallmark of a good and honest government that it is able to admit that it bumbled, accept the criticism, attend to the concerns, and repair the damage as best as possible,” he noted.

Speaking in Parliament on Monday, Trade and Industry Minister Lim Hng Kiang said investor confidence had not been shaken by the escape.

Instead, business people were confident Singapore would learn from it and put things right.

“In fact, it’s never brought up in business circles, here or in the region, which shows it isn’t even a consideration,” said alternative energy analyst Shanthan Selvakumar.

Undergraduate Ho Kok Koon, 23, said it is important that people do not play the blame game whenever there are mistakes.

Others like unionist G. Muttu Kumar feel there are more important concerns for workers, like rising food costs, the cost of living and how the Government can help.

He said: “People don’t bother about this Mas Selamat...they’ve got no time to think about this.”

President of the Union of Security Employees N. Silva put it another way, “You have to move on,” he said.

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