In S’pore, private life matters in politics

Singaporeans would like people in high places to aspire to morals as lofty as their positions but are more forgiving of businessmen than politicians who stumble, say observers here.

“A lot depends on the consequences of the case on the company or institution,” said psychologist Daniel Koh of Insights Mind Centre. “Singaporeans believe in dealing with such issues in a practical way. If the person can do the job, there would be compromise rather than making it into a big issue. But if it affects work, then bosses will tackle it in their own way.”

He is one of two analysts The Sunday Times interviewed regarding remarks made by the wife of disgraced International Monetary Fund chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who resigned last month after being charged with the attempted rape of a New York hotel maid.

Ms Anne Sinclair had defended her husband’s reputation as a ladies’ man, saying “to be able to be a politician, one has to be able to seduce.”

Both experts said Ms Sinclair’s views were not applicable in the context of politics in Singapore. Here, “divisions between private life and public role are not so distinct” and “what one does in one’s private life may have a knock-on effect on the individual’s public role”, says Singapore Management University’s Eugene Tan.

Indeed, those who do not conform with traditional Asian mores may find their chances of gaining a foothold in Singapore politics severely limited.

While general attitudes have become more relaxed on matters such as divorce, certain expectations still remain for those who stand for public office. Mr Tan said: “Where the private life of an individual has an impact on his public standing, there would be consequences.”

Shefali Rekhi