

Executive Summary

The HKSAR Government implemented the Principal Officials Accountability System in 2002. Under this new system, the chief executive nominated candidates of high personal integrity and ability from inside and outside the civil service for appointment by the Central People's Government as principal officials.

The primary objectives of the system were the following: to strengthen the accountability of principal officials; to ensure better response to the needs of the community; to enhance coordination in policy formulation; to strengthen the cooperation between the executive and the legislature; to ensure effective implementation of policies; and to provide quality services to the public.

In 2008, the government further developed the political appointment system by creating two additional layers of political appointment positions, namely Deputy Directors of Bureau and Assistants to Directors of Bureau. One of the aims was to provide a more comprehensive career path for political talent to pursue. Data from the government showed that the current government received more than 1,100 applications for the above-mentioned two-layer positions. The number was a tenfold increase when compared with the number of applications received by the previous government, showing that more people were interested in joining the politically appointed team.

Along with the society's development, citizens' expectations of the politically appointed officials are growing and changing constantly. At the same time, the public are focusing interest on the appointment process, the enforcement of accountability, and the performance of officials.

The next government will begin operations in July 2017. A new team of politically appointed officials will take office in July as well. It is against this background that this research is conducted in an attempt to explore what young people think of the political appointments.

In conducting this research, data were collected for analysis through a random sampling telephone survey in January 2017 of 532 young people aged 15 to 34. Four parallel discussion groups were conducted with a total of 20 young people in January and February. Interviews with five experts or academics were conducted in January.

Major Findings

1. Young people had high expectations of the principal officials regarding their abilities, mainly their ability to grasp public opinions and to be accountable.

The results of the telephone survey showed that more than half of the 532 respondents expected that the principal officials should be able to grasp public opinion (57.7%), or be accountable (55.2%). A considerable proportion (41.4%) expected them to have policy visions. Other possible abilities mentioned by the respondents included: independent thinking (30.0%), able to explain policy clearly (26.8%), and have a friendly and amicable attitude (20.1%).

The criterion above were similar to those mentioned by the young participants in a parallel discussion group when asked about what behaviour of an official constituted accountability. The participants said that an accountable official should demonstrate that he or she is able to manage one's respective policy portfolios, explain policy to the public clearly, is brave enough to apologise for policy mistakes, and is able to find solutions for problems. "Stepping down", in the participants' views, was not the one and only one behaviour reflecting accountability.

2. Nearly 65% of young people reported not trusting the principal officials. Major problems with the appointment system were identified as the absence of a performance-monitoring mechanism (43.9%) and poor transparency of the appointment process (35.2%).

The survey results showed close to 65% (64.8%) of respondents rejected the notion that "they trust the principal officials". Regarding the

biggest problem of the political appointment system, close to 44% (43.9%) said that there was a lack of mechanism for monitoring the performance of officials. The second-biggest problem mentioned was the poor transparency of the appointment process (35.2%).

Young participants in a parallel discussion group said that the extent to which they trusted the principal officials depended on two major factors, namely, the officials' abilities, and their familiarity with the officials' policy visions. Yet, some of the participants complained that the poor transparency of the appointment process had hindered them to know more about the appointed persons.

- 3. The effectiveness of the political appointment system, in the respondents' views, was not strong. Nearly 70% of respondents were dissatisfied with the performance of those currently appointed. Yet, more than 60% believed that expanding the political team could help nurture political talent. Participants in the parallel discussion group considered that the system had value in various areas.**

On a scale of 0 to 10 where 5 is a passing mark, respondents on average gave ratings of 4.74 and 4.71, respectively, when asked about the effectiveness of the system in enhancing coordination in policy formulation, and in strengthening the cooperation between the executive and the legislature. Regarding the effectiveness in absorbing more political talent and fostering a governance team with a common agenda and clear direction, respondents gave average ratings of 4.67 and 4.65, respectively. The ratings for enhancing communication with the public, providing a more comprehensive career path for political talent to pursue, and improving responses to the demands of the public stood at 4.59, 4.49 and 4.38, respectively.

Some 70% (69.8%) of respondents were dissatisfied with the performance of the current appointed officials.

However, close to 63% (62.6%) of respondents were of the view that expanding the politically appointed team could help nurture local political talent.

Meanwhile, participants in a parallel discussion group considered that the appointment system had value in that it provided opportunities for capable people to serve Hong Kong while enhancing awareness – both among officials, for the need for accountability – and among the general public, for the need to monitor their performance.

- 4. More than 30% of respondents did not think that Hong Kong had a sufficient amount of talent to fill the positions within the political team. 30% of respondents said that the work of political talent training should be taken up by the government or the schools/ tertiary institutes, respectively. Participants in the parallel discussion group expressed concerns about their own lack of both political skills and network.**

The survey results showed that more than one-third (34.4%) of respondents did not agree with the notion that Hong Kong had sufficient talent to fill the positions with the political team. When asked about who should take on most of the work of training political talent, 30.4% of respondents referred to the government, and 30.2% referred to the schools/tertiary institutes. Other possible answers included political parties (14.3%) and think tanks (5.3%).

Meanwhile, participants in a parallel discussion group expressed concerns that they lacked political skills and network, which made it difficult for them to apply for a post on a political team.

- 5. More than 70% of respondents believed that a government with good prestige could attract talent to join the political team. Respondents said the government should improve the transparency of the appointment process and put the principle of “appointment by merit” into practice.**

The survey results showed that more than 70% (71.4%) of respondents took a view that a government with good prestige could help attract talent to join the political team.

When asked about what the government should do to encourage talent to join the political team, more than 30% (31.5%) of respondents said that the government should improve the transparency of the appointment process. This was closely followed by the view that the government should uphold the principle of “appointment by merit”, at 29.9%. Slightly more than one-fourth (26.7%) said the government should build up governance prestige.

Main Discussions

- 1. The political appointment system is in a process of development. Despite the fact that respondents have reservations about the performance of the officials, the system has a role to play in nurturing political talent, and it has room for improvement in the future.**

Accountability is one of the cornerstones of good governance. It ensures that government initiatives meet their stated objectives and respond to the needs of the society.

Following the return of Hong Kong to the motherland – and with the elected chief executive, a fully elected legislature, and the increasingly progressive and aggressive media – government operations and policy formulation are subject to increasing public scrutiny and pressure. Yet, due to the permanence of the current system, the current civil service system is not compatible with these demands. The HKSAR Government introduces a politically appointed team at the upper echelon of the government, and the officials under the team are responsible for their policy portfolios. Politically appointed officials, unlike permanent civil servants, would be personally accountable for the success or failures of their policy areas. The implementation of the political appointment system, thus, is in line with the needs and development of Hong Kong society.

The political appointment system has been operational for 15 years and its development is still ongoing. There is room for further improvement in the future.

- 2. Young people take a rational approach regarding mechanism for measuring accountability. The communication skills of the officials need to be improved.**

The young people expressed their views that the aim of accountability does not necessarily mean bringing sanctions to the officials, but rather it means fostering a mindset of responsible attitude among officials in taking up their posts, including showing ability to explain policy to the public clearly, to apologise to the public for mistakes, and to put forward solutions for problems. The views expressed show that young people take a rational approach regarding the mechanism for measuring accountability. Meanwhile, all these behaviours require good communication skills, reflecting that young people pay attention to the communication skills of the officials.

- 3. Increasing the transparency of the appointment process could help improve the public's trust in the officials.**

In the young people's views, one of the biggest problems of the political appointment system lies in its poor transparency of the appointment process, while quite a considerable proportion of young people do not trust the principal officials. It seems that the so-called "appointment by merit" principle, which is always claimed by the government, has failed to earn the trust of the public. This could be negatively affecting the public's perceptions of the officials.

The HKSAR Government should do something to improve the transparency of the appointment process in an effort to, on the one hand, make the officials better-known to the public, and on the other hand strengthen the public's trust in the officials.

- 4. There has been an increasing demand for political talent. It is worth putting more effort into strengthening and developing the pool for political talent for Hong Kong's society.**

The number of applications for the posts of Deputy Directors of Bureau and Assistants to Directors of Bureau has been increasing. On this foundation, the government should develop a mechanism to store and manage the talent database.

The political landscape of Hong Kong society is full of challenges, and it needs a group of talented people with enthusiasm and willingness to join the governance team. There is a pragmatic need for the society's various groups – such as tertiary institutes, political parties, civil service, think tanks, and so on – to open up platforms where future talent might be nurtured for the benefit of society as a whole.

- 5. The political appointment system is implemented without the parallel development of party politics. This is unfavourable to cultivating a governance team with a common agenda. This also intensifies the problem of talent shortage to fill the political team.**

One of the biggest challenges of the HKSAR Government's political appointment system lies in its lack of party politics. This could bring certain discouraging effects, such as hindering the cultivation of a governance team with a common agenda. The filling of political posts using party politics is also discouraged. The development of party politics in Hong Kong society is a concern.

- 6. The chief executive leads the governance team. The chief executive should exert his/ her charisma to get a group of people who are competent to run the government.**

Under the political appointment system, it is the chief executive who nominates people to the political team. It is also the chief executive who leads the governance team. Therefore, the chief executive plays a vital role regarding the operation of the political appointment system.

Yet, recently, the approval rating of the government continues to be poor, while the constitutional development of Hong Kong society is stagnating. Together with the fact that there have been controversies over policies in recent years, this might be affecting the public's perceptions of the legitimacy of the politically appointed officials nominated by the chief executive. Meanwhile, some people might find it an unattractive proposition to join the so-called hot kitchen.

The chief executive should exert his/ her charisma to get a group of people with competence to run the government.

Recommendations

This study proposes the following recommendations:

1. Expand the political appointment system to strengthen the nurturing of political talent.

The study recommends expanding the political appointment system by creating low-ranking positions for the less experienced talent on the one hand, and on the other hand offering internship placement for university students to accumulate political skills and build their networks.

2. Establish a formal platform for the officials to share their visions.

The study recommends establishing a formal platform for the officials to share their visions early on when they first take office. This could make the officials better-known to the public, while narrowing the distance between the officials and the public.

3. Enhance direct communication between the officials and the public.

The study recommends that the officials make good use of all means available, both online and offline, of enhancing public opinion

collections.

The officials should also take turns visiting secondary schools to have interactions with students, which can enhance mutual respect and mutual trust with young people.

4. Ensure the governance experience of the officials could be retained and passed on.

The governance experience of the politically appointed officials is precious. Drawing inspiration from overseas practice, the study recommends that the government to retain the governance experience of the former politically appointed officials by any means, as a reference for the further development of the system in future.