Civil Society: A Coming of Age?

From the Speakers’ Corner and the growth of non-government organisations, to the rise of alternative media – the seedlings of a vibrant civil society have taken root. Coming out from under the watchful eye of the government, what has shaped the rise of an active citizenry in Singapore?

By Ho Li Fong
A surprise coup of a small but well established women’s advocacy group, the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), captured both the headlines and the passionate responses from Singaporeans in April this year, animating civil society. The month-long power struggle at Aware saw two groups hurl brickbats at each other over Christianity and homosexuality issues, capturing headlines and splitting followers into two opposing camps. The saga culminated in an extraordinary general meeting where the old guard regained the helm. Just search for “Aware” on YouTube and Twitter for a blow-by-blow account.

The manner in which the leadership tussle unravelled and the widespread attention it garnered, has left a mark in the history of Singapore’s civil society.

Dr Terence Chong of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies told Singapore that the Aware incident was a milestone in that it dispelled the myth of the apathetic Singaporean, by showing that ‘Singaporeans not only feel strongly about certain freedoms and values, but were also prepared to act to preserve them.” It also hinted at the idea of Singaporeans who are ready for a pluralist democracy.

“Speakers’ Corner and the Public Order Bill may seem to contradict each other but, in reality, is part and parcel of the way the government addresses the aspirations of younger Singaporeans without losing its power.”

- Dr Terence Chong, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

The idea of civil society in Singapore is usually met with resignation and cynicism. The state has long been perceived as playing a hand in circumventing the growth of public activism. But the moves that have led to the growth of a nascent civil society in Singapore took place in fact, almost two decades ago in 1991 when George Yeo, then the Minister for Information and the Arts, proposed to prune the “banyan tree” of a strong state to “judiciously” allow civil society to germinate. Since then, how has it evolved?

Compared to the government’s public castigation of Singaporean writer Catherine Lim for commenting on the leadership of the People’s Action Party (PAP) in an article titled “The PAP and the People – A Great Affective Divide” in 1994, there appears to be a widening of out-of-bound markers in recent years (see sidebar on page 16c from the debate on Section 377A of the Penal Code which criminalises homosexual acts) to campaigns for foreign worker rights and easing of rules on Speakers’ Corner at Hong Lim Park. Notably, in the Aware saga, the government largely stayed out of the picture even when taboo topics such as homosexuality and religion took centre stage. Yet, legislation like the recently enacted Public Order Act (an act to broaden police powers to stop any public activity held without permission that is viewed to compromise public order) is a reminder that the government is still prepared to take pre-emptive action to step in and circumvent civil action.

Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Tan Tarn How observes that right restrictions do still remain in Singapore, and that the state continues to be “wary” of civil society, which has to “constantly consider the acceptability by the state of not just what they do but how they go about doing it.”

Dr Chong points out it would be “too simplistic” to regard the government as either becoming more liberal or more restrictive. “The government realises that it has to liberalise in some areas, especially when bad publicity outweighs the political cost, and is restrictive in other areas when it wants to retain the power to control certain situations,” he said. “Speakers’ Corner and the Public Order Bill may seem to contradict each other but, in reality, is part and parcel of the way the government addresses the aspirations of younger Singaporeans without losing its power.”

Listening to the Aware saga to a “stress test” of the development of civil society, Singapore Management University assistant law professor Eugene Tan says the government still has a role to play in ensuring that the public’s sector is not a source of divisions, tensions and misinformation. “The government is part of the problem (because it has wielded control for a long time) and part of the solution (by letting go in an enlightened manner) in enhancing the robustness of the system.”
EMERGENCE OF THE NEW MEDIA

What has contributed to the growth of civil discourse? New media and information technology (IT) have certainly been instrumental. If savvy, the pervasiveness of the Internet and the immediacy of the medium allow the cyber community to react faster than traditional media, stirring up debate in blogs and forums, resulting in an increasingly vibrant socio-political blogosphere.

In an IPS seminar, researchers noted that sites like *The Online Citizen* and WayangParty.com pose a challenge to traditional media as they move beyond armchair critique to first-hand reporting. *The Online Citizen*, for example, reported on the happenings at the AWEEG quicker than traditional media such as *The Straits Times*. In addition to mainstream media reports, articles with alternative news angles now proliferate online. Social networking sites like Facebook also help coalesce individuals or fragmented groups into teams to rally for a cause. IPS' Tan dubbs this the “I am not alone” phenomenon of the Internet, which he says emboldens netizens.

Recognising the influence of the new media, the PAP has proactively taken steps to embrace it, establishing the Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society, and New Media Capabilities Group which sends members into cyberspace covertly to moderate anti-establishment opinions. The government's feedback unit, Reach, also increasingly gathers grassroots sentiments via online means.

Amongst the government’s key concerns may be the impact of new media on the next general elections due 2011. During the last elections in 2006, the virtual world was abuzz with diverse political views; video clips and images of massive turnouts at opposition rallies – which traditional media typically omit – diffused rampanty.

Having witnessed the effects of new media on the 2008 US presidential election, and the possible role of civil society in bringing about the political tsunami in Malaysia’s 2008 elections, in which the ruling coalition was denied the two-thirds majority to pass constitutional amendments for the first time since 1969, Singapore’s government will likely take steps to prepare itself to manage challenges issued by civil society via unconventional media streams.

That said, Tan downplays the potential of new media on elections: “It must be remembered that even though voting is compulsory, those who are interested in politics, much less those who use the Internet as a medium for information and participation, are in the minority.”

THE PATH AHEAD

The evolution of civil society is an ongoing process with changing players, issues and mediums. Dr Chong foresees a trend towards greater advocacy and a landscape with “greater diversity and a cacophony of different interests and demands which will reflect a more cosmopolitan society.”

(“It is not just the government but Singaporeans (who collectively form civil society) as well who will need to possess the mindset, skills, and shared purpose to make the diversity work to our advantage as we learn to deal with the differences in a way that doesn’t divide us any further,” posits Dr Eugene Tan.

“Singaporeans have to take ownership of their ability to cope with a reduced government presence in many facets of Singapore life.”

FURTHER READING

*SMU*