

A year of greater engagement

Since last May's General Election, the Government has been reaching out more to civil society and netizens. How successful has it been? What has been the impact on policymaking?



by Alicia Wong and Teo Xuanwei
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Minister for National Development, Mr Khaw Boon Wan, taking a walk at the KTM tracks, whose development has been the subject of an extensive public consultation exercise. TODAY FILE PHOTO

Just last week, a statutory board - the National Parks Board - piloted a project, together with three animal welfare groups, to catch stray dogs with the aim of re-homing them eventually.

It was a sign that these groups' and other dog lovers' long campaign for a more humane approach than the usual practice of culling strays could be bearing fruit. More importantly, this served as evidence to some quarters that the Government has become more amenable, in general, to coming up with solutions with an ear to ground-up feedback.

Barely two months earlier, however, a civil society meeting with government officials over plans for a new road in Bukit Brown drew criticism from several nature and heritage groups, because they were not given time to propose alternatives. It led some to question if the Government had indeed become more flexible.

Minister of State (National Development and Manpower) Tan Chuan-Jin, who chaired the

meeting, responded to the criticism by saying the meeting was never intended to be a consultation exercise, but simply to share background information and policymakers' considerations as well as the road plans.

Responses varied in the aftermath: Some said officials had done enough to engage interest groups, while others asserted that a decision had already been made before the consultations, and hence there was no genuine engagement.

Exactly one year on from what has been recognised as a watershed General Election (GE), which many including government backbenchers expected would herald a more consultative style of governance, how much has changed in the way the Republic's leaders engage with civil society?

MORE OUTREACH TO ACTIVIST GROUPS

For one, government bodies appear to be showing a greater willingness to not only listen to but, indeed, to canvass the views of civil society groups.

Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) executive director Corinna Lim cites how the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) recently initiated, for the first time, a meeting with women's groups and told them to "give us your most candid and frank feedback".

The meeting was attended by MCYS Acting Minister Chan Chun Sing, Minister of State Halimah Yacob and Permanent Secretary Chan Heng Kee, she said.

AWARE has also been working with the police on its sexual assault befriender service, added Ms Lim. "There's like a new energy; there seems to be a lot going on," she said. "I keep telling people that there has not been a better time to be in civil society because things are really moving a lot faster."

Founder and president of the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) Bridget Lew said the Manpower Ministry has also started to hold consultations with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other stakeholders on migrant issues. "The Government actively engaged us, invited us to their office, departments, ministry for talks," she said.

Animal Concerns Research & Education Society (ACRES) executive director Louis Ng noted that there has been "quite a big shift" in the past year, "to get feedback before policies are made, rather than after".

Some, like the Cat Welfare Society (CWS), feel they have been given the chance to move up to become collaborators. Said its president Veron Lau: "It is in the past year that we felt we were more closely recognised as a partner, and more than a handful of agencies have become proactive in seeking to collaborate with us."

The engagement efforts have not stopped at civil activists. The online community and new media - which President Tony Tan Keng Yam had highlighted in his Address in Parliament last October was a "tremendous tool to empower individuals, link us up with one another and mobilise people for social causes" - also has been reached out to.

Mr Andrew Loh, blogger and founder of publichouse.sg, said there has been more "willingness to engage in face-to-face meetings". He said Mr Tan Chuan-Jin had met him and other bloggers informally.

It was markedly different from in the past, he said, when the Government "tried to discredit us, bloggers and citizen journalists", as being merely irresponsible or irrational fringe voices.

HAS CHANGE BEEN SUBSTANTIVE?

While some hail the fact that there has been greater reaching out and, in some cases, willingness to consider alternative solutions, others have more demanding expectations that they feel have not yet been met.

Dr Terence Chong, senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, said the past year has seen "one or two successful collaborations and a few unsuccessful ones" between the Government and civil society, and "this is in keeping with the trend over the years".

"To say that there has been a change in the way the Government engages in civil society is to imply a profound shift in governance where the former has become willing to bargain and concede to civil society on a fairly regular basis. I do not think this has happened," he said.

Mr Alex Au, blogger of YawningBread.org and treasurer of Transient Workers Count Too, also is of the view that engagement efforts have been "skin-deep" to an extent and that the Government has not budged on its "fundamental, ideological positions".

Expectations of what "engagement" should entail, and what it should result in, will continue to be negotiated for some time between Government and society - and indeed between segments of society itself.

But the factual record attests to several concrete changes to policy that were made with input from the ground, in this short span of a year.

For one, there is the extensive ongoing public consultation exercise over the development of the Rail Corridor - the 26km stretch of former KTM track land between Tanjong Pagar and Woodlands returned by Malaysia to Singapore last year.

Suggestions raised during the inaugural forum on animal welfare in June last year also helped formulate long-term solutions for animal welfare, which were announced at a

second forum in February. These included the setting up of a national adoption centre, a national microchip database and reviewing the rule that currently allows only small-breed dogs in Housing and Development Board flats.

Then, there is the repeal of Section 157(d) of the Evidence Act so that a rape victim's sexual history cannot be used to discredit her in court. This issue was raised by AWARE and publichouse.sg.

Still, it would be misleading to attribute all changes in policy to the direct result of increased engagement with civil society groups after the 2011 GE.

In some cases, campaigning by NGOs served more to bolster an issue already under scrutiny because of regional or global factors.

For instance, the mandatory weekly day off for domestic helpers whose work permits are issued or renewed from January next year, became a reality in no small part due to decade-long lobbying. But it was also the case that Singapore found itself among a minority of countries which employ many maids but did not mandate rest days.

Government politicians behind the cause also played a part.

HOME's Ms Lew credited Mdm Halimah for pushing for the new rest-day rule. AWARE's Ms Lim said Law and Foreign Minister K Shanmugam was "responsive and efficient" on the repeal of Section 157(d) of the Evidence Act. Mr Shanmugam has also been supportive of animal welfare groups' efforts - for instance, his own Chong Pang ward is involved in pilot initiatives to help manage the stray cat population.

Civil society groups also noted that the increased engagement was built upon years of cultivating a relationship with the Government.

SLIPPERY SLIDE INTO POPULISM

While the Government has pledged to make public consultation a cornerstone of its policymaking, what are the dilemmas and potential pitfalls at play in this approach?

Already, the more open attitude towards dialogue has heightened the desire and demands to be heard, rather than assuaging public discontent over what is perceived as an overly prescriptive style of governance, say Members of Parliament (MPs).

The demands to be listened to have always been there, MP Zaqy Mohamad (Chua Chu Kang Group Representation Constituency) noted, but have become "more pronounced" after the elections. "I suppose there is a perception that the Government is on the back foot, that with declining support the PAP (People's Action Party) will be under more pressure to give in, for example ... or (a perception that) the Government is more willing to be populist to secure more support."

MP Baey Yam Keng (Tampines GRC) agrees the results of the polls last year have "empowered people" into seeing that "mine is a voice, a vote, and I can make a difference".

Former Nominated MP Viswa Sadasivan said: "I'm seeing, not an abating of that desire to hit at the Government, (but) it getting stronger over the months." This has had the effect of putting the Government constantly on a "firefighting mode", he added.

The critical question is whether all this leads to a sense of entitlement among citizens that the Government must act, all the time, in accordance with feedback.

Might expectations be raised beyond what is reasonable, such that it leads to a gridlock in decision-making - or in the extreme, see every decision put to a referendum? Would this lead down the slippery road of populism?

Dr Chong noted: "There is a difference between making a gesture of reaching out to hear different views and actually acting on all of them. The former does not automatically lead to the latter."

This mismatch in expectations was previously highlighted by Mr Tan Chuan-Jin as one of his takeaways from the Bukit Brown saga. He reflected then that "there should be better appreciation of the expectations on all sides so that we can develop a dialogue that is constructive and which moves the issue forward".

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean also touched on this point in recent days, saying: "Having consultations can raise high expectations that all views and proposals will be accepted. But this is not always possible as the views and proposals can be contradictory, and it can be tough to choose between them."

The bottom line, he noted, is that "the fact that a proposal was not adopted does not mean that it was not listened to or taken into account".

Mr Au argues that, because there has not been "substantive change" in the Government's approach in his view, "frustrations are rising", leading to the increased tendency to be vocal about it online and offline.

GRIDLOCK? NOT NECESSARILY

Those who disagree with always going with the ground's demands point to a feared scenario which this Government, ever-mindful that the Republic's survival hinges on the ability to change course swiftly in turbulent times, has frequently cautioned against: Policy gridlock.

Nominated Member of Parliament and law don Eugene K B Tan said Singaporeans should "move away from viewing consultation through rose-tinted lenses".

"For every Singaporean who wants the Government to consult, there are a few more

Singaporeans who would rather the Government just get down to the job of running the country," he said. "Much depends on the confidence of the Government of the day and whether it has the backbone to do what is right for the country."

But Professor Ang Peng Hwa, acting head of the Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information's journalism and publishing division, feels that if engagement means a longer time to make decisions, it is not altogether bad.

The Government now invites public comments on policy issues and incorporates the feedback into policy, such as in the case of the Data Protection Bill, he said. "I don't see paralysis; I see a slowing down, but I think people prefer that."

Added former NMP Siew Kum Hong: "Populism, indecision and paralysis of action are outcomes attributable directly to the shortcomings of individuals themselves, and how they engage with people did not create those shortcomings."

MP Alex Yam (Chua Chu Kang GRC) sees the engagement process going even further.

Immediately after the GE, the Government studied the ground reaction, and then people with different interests got more confident in sharing their views and comments. Now, he said, while the conversation between the Government and society has become more mature, everyone is still feeling their way around.

The next phase of the engagement process, Mr Yam believes, will see the Government becoming even more comfortable in sharing information on policies with stakeholders before they are introduced.

And, eventually, there could be more new policies that are a direct result of consultation from the ground-up, he added.

'FRIENDING' NETIZENS: TWO VIEWS

A gamut of politicians have since increasingly focused more of their attention on the online community, explaining policies, engaging with netizens, sharing their thoughts on issues - or sometimes, just trying to connect on a more personal level.

For example, when he launched his Facebook page last month, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in a welcome note that, besides using the social networking site to share what he is doing and thinking about, he wanted netizens to "help shape ideas and understanding of what we can do together to improve our lives".

In one status update, he said he had sent some of the feedback received on his Facebook page to various ministries to consider, adding that he took netizens' views "very seriously".

Mr Baey also has monthly townhall sessions on his Facebook page for residents to "bring up any issue they want".

But political observers think an increased online presence could work both for and against politicians.

Mr Sadasivan's view is that the Government has focused too much on online engagement.

In addition to "symbolically alienating" a spectrum of society that is uncomfortable discussing emotionally-charged issues online, the outcome of such engagement also cannot be predicted "no matter how sincere the effort is", because new media is not curated.

He pointed to how something as "innocuous" as PM Lee's posting about what he had for dinner has been turned into an issue. "I don't think it's helping the PM's image to be involved in discussions of that nature," Mr Sadasivan said. Social media, albeit an important platform, is "not the ideal platform for the discussion of substantive issues in a substantive way".

Other observers, however, say there is a growing desire among Singaporeans to "connect" with politicians.

While citizens want politicians to maintain the "authoritative" aura, they do not want them to be "distant", said Prof Ang, adding that it is "part of the role" of a politician to connect with people. He lauded PM Lee's Facebook page, which combines regular updates about his daily activities with links to serious matters, as "literally quite engaging".

That PM Lee has launched his Facebook page also speaks of the "confidence" the Government is gaining to engage the online sphere, he added.

NMP Eugene Tan said: "We're moving away from an era of technocrat-politicians, to one where our MPs have to be more a politician than a technocrat. We now expect our political leaders to emote, to engage, to be 'friends'."

"Political leaders are now more 'personable' because of their presence in social media," said Dr Brian Lee, head of communication programmes at UniSIM's School of Business. "This in fact helps the political leaders effectively survey the emotional landscape on the ground, and hence be able to better understand what the people really want and need."

VOCAL MINORITY, SILENT MAJORITY?

Mr Andrew Loh is all for the authorities taking their online engagement, including of socio-political websites, a step further: "What should be continued are the offline engagements which have taken place, in face-to-face, real-life meetings."

One school of thought, however, is that voices in the online sphere are dominated by a "vocal minority", which is not necessarily representative of the general sentiments of a "silent majority".

An obvious challenge for politicians, thus, is whether these views become perceived by an individual as the community's stand, thereby shaping the agenda - a point not lost on DPM Teo, who asked during last month's National Community Engagement Programme dialogue how we could get more of the "silent majority" to speak up.

But Mr Siew argued that "it is not apparent to me whether the vocal elements are truly a small minority". He questioned: "If the silent majority is staying silent, is that because they agree with what is being said online?"

Mr Siew noted that certain online forums "attract a pretty mainstream audience, and you still see a lot of critical voices and a lot of quietly cynical voices there". He said: "So that does tell me that critical voices are very much part of the mainstream."

Citing online engagement as "just the most direct and effective way" of listening to people in modern democracies, Mr Siew said it is "then up to politicians to decide how and what to do once they have heard the people".

But while Dr Lee's view is that the "vocal minority usually are the opinion leaders" who get others thinking about issues, Asst Prof Tan still believes that social media is dominated by this minority, and that they may "lull politicians into a false sense of engagement".

He stressed the need for face-to-face engagement, saying an "overemphasis on walking and talking the virtual ground is grossly inadequate in knowing what the silent majority is thinking".

SHARE MORE INFORMATION, GROW A THICKER SKIN

All said, while the engagement process may still be undergoing refining, civil society groups and observers unanimously agree work should go on - starting with more open sharing of information by the Government.

Economic Society of Singapore vice-president Yeoh Lam Keong said greater openness about the policymaking process, be it over wage restructuring, immigration, population policy or even monetary policy, could allow experts in the private and professional sectors, as well as civil society, to chip in with suggestions for solutions that are better for the Republic and Singaporeans.

"This is important as policymaking on key issues - whether economic or social - is becoming so complex that the Government badly needs the expert and stakeholder contributions," he said. "A Freedom of Information Act would greatly facilitate this process institutionally."

There also needs to be a more relaxed view of the tenor of debates, analysts feel; those who do not always keep a polite tone or who raise contrarian views must not be seen as having flouted the rules of engagement.

"Once Government has decided to go full-throttle into engagement, they have to develop a thicker skin," said Mr Sadasivan, who observed that this "thickening of the skin" has not kept pace with the rise in engagement.

Indeed, whenever challenges are mounted against government positions or policies, an "anti-government" glow is often cast on the source of disagreement. Could debate here one day mature to a stage where a non-partisan ground - one that is able to critique and offer alternative policy suggestions without being drawn into party politics - emerges?

Asst Prof Tan said that, while this non-partisan ground is emerging, "it's too early to tell if it's sustainable and whether it will sway Singaporeans to avoid looking at policies and outcomes in binary terms".

Mr Siew, however, says there have been non-partisan speakers "for a long time", such as former Permanent Secretary Ngiam Tong Dow.

"The space for them has been small for the longest time and is growing slowly. The bigger challenge is to get establishment personalities like professors Lim Chong Yah and Phua Kai Hong to participate in public more often and more consistently," Mr Siew said.

Prof Lim, who was formerly chief of the National Wages Council, recently called for a "shock therapy" involving huge raises for low-income earners and salary freezes at the top to close the widening income gap in Singapore, and ease its dependence on foreign workers. His suggestion drew robust responses from ministers, including labour chief Lim Swee Say.

Soon after, Prof Phua, who is from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, warned that ElderShield, the Republic's financing scheme for the intermediate- and long-term care sector, will not be enough for Singaporeans to meet basic costs for such services.

Ultimately, for engagement to bear fruit, all stakeholders in civil society must play their part in coming up with viable solutions to policy issues, rather than just pointing out the shortfalls.

Said CWS' Ms Lau: "We really should be getting down to talking about the brass tacks of what is possible to achieve now, and what we must make possible in the not-so-distant future."

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