Speakers' Corner, 14 years on

Activist Choo Zheng Xi notes that these days, "events that you see at the Speakers' Corner are very organised, very sophisticated" and sociologist Paulin Straughan says the Corner now "legitimises alternative views".

SINGAPORE: Monday (Sept 1) marks 14 years since the Speakers' Corner was set up at Hong Lim Park, giving Singaporeans a public space to speak on any issue without needing a licence or permit.

The number of applications to use the venue for events like speeches and demonstrations has been on the rise since 2011. Academics say these are signs that Singapore is moving towards a more active and outspoken citizenry.

Established in 2000, the Speakers' Corner was modelled after a similar corner in London's Hyde Park. One reasons why Hong Lim Park was chosen over others is for its proximity to the business district as well as Chinatown.

Those who were there remember the buzz when the Speakers' Corner first opened 14 years ago, like 60-year-old Tan Buck Cher, who runs Yee Hiang Tea Merchant shop opposite Hong Lim Park.
Mr Tan said, "I am just opposite, and once in a while would go over to take a look during lunch time. In the beginning, there'd be more people. I'm not sure if they were curious, or just wanted to have a listen."

One man who's no stranger to the Speakers' Corner is lawyer and activist Choo Zheng Xi. In 2000, he became the youngest person to give a speech at the Corner at the age of 15.

Mr Choo, who is also the founder of The Online Citizen, says discussions held at the area then were a mixbag of opinions and pet peeves, "In the early days, the discussions were very unfocussed and ad-hoc. You had a lot of individuals coming here to make a lot of strange speeches about their pet peeves.

"But these days, the events that you see at the Speakers' Corner are very organised, very sophisticated. The Speakers' Corner has reflected a greater openness in society and a greater willingness of people to speak out on issues they care about. So you see The Speakers' Corner used to talk about social issues, LGBT, cost of living issues, transport, population, CPF. And you see it also being used for human rights issues and civil liberties issues, such as Gaza and human rights for Burma. So you see a whole range of issues, using the Speakers' Corner as a platform to get the message across."

There are rules that speakers have to abide by. For example, they cannot touch on religious matters or cause hostility between racial or religious groups in Singapore.

But the Government has slowly been easing the rules. In 2008, for example, it allowed Singaporeans to organise demonstrations without a permit. That was also the year that the police handed over the management of the space to NParks.

**GROWING DESIRE FOR VIEWS TO BE HEARD**

The government statutory board witnessed how interest in the corner picked up recently. NParks said it has seen the number of applications to use the space drop from 2009 to 2011. Last year, the board received about 169 applications, almost double the 2011 low of 85 requests.

From the beginning of the year till July 2014, there have already been 89 applications. Crowds have also grown, as seen at the protests against the Population White Paper last year, and those against the Central Provident Fund system this year.

Some academics attribute this to a growing desire among Singaporeans to get their views heard.

One of them is Dr Kirpal Singh, Director of the Wee Kim Wee Centre at the Singapore Management University. "In the old days - 14 years ago, even up to about four, five years ago - the myth was that if you said something that was a bit out of turn, or that the authorities didn't like, you'd be caught, arrested, lose your job, end up in prison, all kinds of things.

"Now I think that myth has been 'exploded' because of all the blogging and Facebook notes that go on, and the tweeting that's around. All these noises are convincing people that it's OK to make noise. People today are bolder, they're also better educated and they're more willing to engage on national issues and causes that are important to them."
The Pink Dot gathering has been another notable event at the Speakers' Corner since 2009. Organisers of the annual gathering for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community (LGBT) have relied on social media to promote their movement, but they stress that a physical gathering is also necessary.

Mr Paerin Choa, spokesperson for Pink Dot SG, explained, "People go online to express their views and opinions, but a physical gathering is more tangible. It allows young people to bring their parents - who may not have access to social media - to come down to experience and to understand. It creates more awareness in terms of society. We've seen more dialogue happening for LGBT issues."

**SPEAKERS' CORNER 'LEGITIMISES ALTERNATIVE VIEWS'**

Sociologist Paulin Straughan, from the National University of Singapore, says the Speakers' Corner legitimises alternative views. "The problem with social media is it's anonymous, a lot of times we don't know who is speaking. We don't know a lot of times whether who is speaking, and whether or not it's a legitimate concern voiced by a Singaporean, or a mischief maker. So having a platform like the Speakers' Corner brings real people together. It legitimises alternative views. You cannot dismiss it as just noise on the internet when you see real, ordinary Singaporeans gathering together to either show support or voice concerns."

Going forward, however, she hopes to see the Speakers' Corner used for a wider purpose, to allow greater discussion among Singaporeans.

Assoc prof Straughan says it is good that Singaporeans are becoming more vocal, but they need to learn to air their views in a constructive and coherent manner, "We are moving towards becoming a more noisy nation and that's good. But the next step for us is to learn how to speak in a very constructive manner because you don't want the speech to destabilise society and cause rifts in the population, to polarise Singaporeans because we are after all one nation. So how do we learn to speak coherently? It's through practice isn't it? That's why the presence of Speakers' Corner and other avenues for Singaporeans to voice their concerns - they are all very important because collectively, they give opportunities for Singaporeans to learn how to present their alternative viewpoints and their ideas in a constructive manner that will make it easy for lawmakers to translate into laws, regulations and tweaks to policies.

She adds that Singaporeans should not simply use the Speakers' Corner as an outlet for venting their anger, "We shouldn't just be going down to the Speakers' Corner when we're angry and we're not happy about things. We should be going down to the Speakers' Corner in general, just because we want to have a conversation, to join in like-minded gatherings. It doesn't have to be always protesting something. It could be affirming something. That's the part we don't do as much. That's why the silent majority must be awakened so that their voices can be heard."

Others suggest the Government could even consider expanding the Speakers' Corner, or to have similar corners set up in more parts of Singapore.

- CNA/by