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Growing Civil Society in Singapore

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CIVIL SOCIETY IN SINGAPORE

After some time in the wilderness, civil society is, once again, back in favour. Braema Mathi traces the incredible journey that it has taken in Singapore and asks what the future has in store.
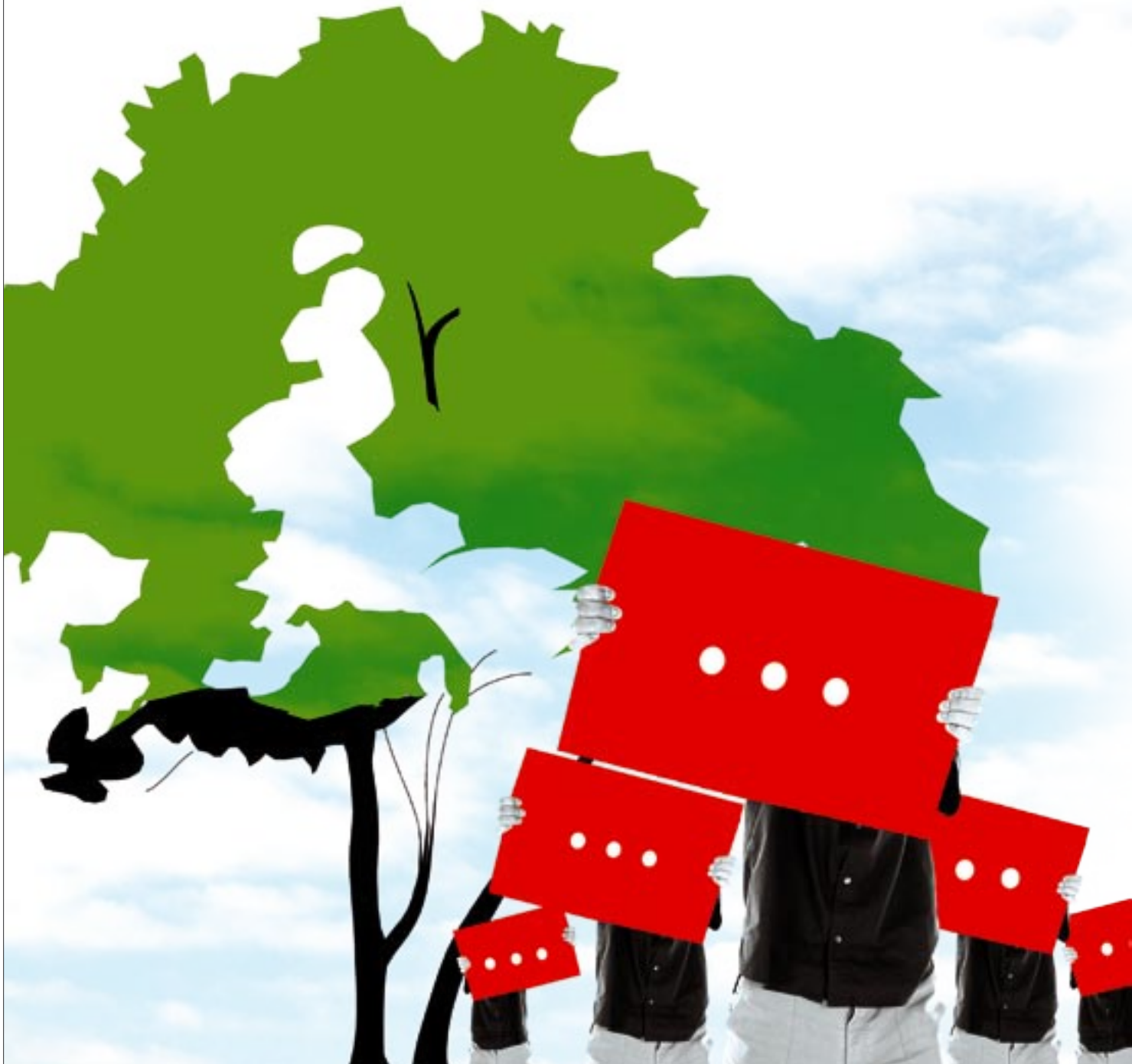
The idea is that civil society is 'in' today and not 'out' in the doghouse as it has sometimes been in the past. Today, civil society is sexy and attractive. Individuals are keen to be part of it. Governments want to engage it, to consult and solicit its views; and to also show that they too are becoming open and democratic. The private sector is keen to partner civil society to show its own commitment to people's well-being as part of its corporate social responsibility. Everyone wants in.

There was a time when things were not so rosy. Individuals or organisations became outcasts as they were seen to be uncompromisingly persistent in airing views contrary to the State's agenda. That is when those professing to belong to civil society were labelled by the State as trouble-makers, noise makers, rabble rousers, sensationalists and dissidents.

For now, civil society is increasingly seen as the third sector, seemingly on an equal footing with the government and the private sector. This has been possible as, globally, there is a greater emphasis on democracy, an open and free market economy and modernisation. At the same time, the definition of civil society, too, has widened to include a bigger group with different targets and approaches.

What, then, is this civil society? How is it that it is so diverse, dons many colours, operates in many shades, takes on many shapes and is called by so many names?[1]

Keeping Civil Society In Perspective

Civil society can be defined as "the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values … covering common interests whether it be political, economic, cultural, scientific, anthropological, social interests."[2] Examples of civil society groups are registered charities, non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

The more activist-oriented a civil society is, the less stable its relationship with the State, the private sector and the public. This relationship will not be static as the goalposts keep shifting, sometimes closer to the centre of public office, and at other times, further from it. How one connects to civil society is also a case of perspective – one of the glass being half full or half empty. This perception depends on the prevailing attitude of the State towards activism, the level of inter-connectedness among all three actors (state, private, and public sectors), the issue of the moment and the level of engagement by activists in civil society.[3]

In other words, the witch who was burnt yesterday at the stake for being blasphemous could well be today's visionary for thinking out of the box and tomorrow's change-leader, inspiring new solutions.

In Singapore, a classic example of being 'in' or 'out' with the State can be seen through the government's response to novelist Dr Catherine Lim's infamous 1994 essay when she wrote on the leadership styles of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. It drew a sharp and public chastising[4] from the State which silenced her for a while, before she picked up the pen again to voice her thoughts. Since then the State has been more reticent on Dr Lim's critical essays on the authoritative State and its relationship with the people. One possible reason for this is that general perceptions have shifted since 1994 towards a more open society.

New technologies are also bringing many interest groups together in the virtual world – blogs, Facebook e-discussions, and chat-rooms to name a few. These forms can only increase the capacity and reach of civil society.

A local example of e-solidarity occurred when local blogger Mr Brown was suspended[5] by *Today*, the free morning paper, for his article on cost of living issues. The public vented its frustrations on the Web, pledged its support for Mr Brown and commented on the lack of press freedom and State interference.

The Unfolding Of Civil Society In Singapore

And while we applaud today's civil society members, it is all too easy to forget the work of pioneers from the past who, by today's standards, were activists.

One example was Mrs Samuel Dyer, a 19th century British missionary who was upset that girls in the then Malayan Peninsula were deprived of an education. In 1842, she founded in Singapore the first all-girls' school – St. Margaret's.[6]

The social movement with perhaps the biggest impact in Singapore was the women's movement which still influences policies. It was born during the 1950s in Malaya with Mrs Shirin Fozdar leading the charge. She led the anti-polygamy campaign, founded the Singapore Council of Women (1952) and, with other women, lobbied the People's Action Party (PAP) to get women's issues into the party's manifesto.

The PAP did just that and went on to win the 1959 elections with the vote from many women. The PAP never forgot this support. In 1961, it passed the Women's Charter and outlawed polygamy.

Singapore's path to independence too was shaped by a succession of dedicated activists, many of whom focused on ending colonial rule. Some, such as Singapore's former Chief Minister David Marshall and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, very successfully made the transition from being viewed as rabble-

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rousers and threats to leaders to become change agents in their own right.

In the early years of post-independent Singapore, there was much unsolicited collective action – the germination of a civil society. This was embodied in that pure and refreshing 'kampong spirit' that saw neighbors sweat and work side by side to dig trenches to prevent rain waters from entering each other's homes. Clans and faith-based groups built temples, churches, mosques, associations, schools and hospitals so that the community had a place to go to for worship, education or health care.

Much of this civic-mindedness was rooted in a sense of mutual responsibility to one another. There have been efforts since that period to harness this kampong spirit and repackage it as more modern, structured grassroots organisations such as Residents' Committees.

But these efforts have met with limited success. Much of the kampong spirit has, over the decades, been lost on account of an over-zealous State that has so comprehensively directed developments for the country. This has left less space for untidy, spontaneous and slower-paced consensus-building which might have kept the people more engaged in not just giving feedback, but in owning the process of making improvements.

Still, civic-minded groups have always remained active, from the early days of running soup kitchens for wharf labourers to meeting today's needs of an ageing population. They, too have morphed, in certain instances, to keep pace with changing needs.

And as new social trends emerge, new interest groups are also formed; among them, animal welfare societies, cancer support groups, halfway houses to rehabilitate drug addicts, and support groups for those with gambling addictions.[7]

Though these activities are oriented towards being more civic-minded, many believe they are civil society groups advocating from a premise of fundamental rights of the individual citizen.[8]

The People's Association, for instance, has described itself as a non-governmental organisation. Community Development Councils led by mayors who are Members of Parliament take the view that their work is to be aligned to the civil society mould in advocating for involvement by citizens. State-driven campaigns, such as Singapore 21 (that promotes active citizenry especially among the young) – and the Singapore Kindness Movement are two examples of civil and civic issues being packaged as one and the same thing.

While both civic and civil issues refer to movements that address societies' needs, being civic-minded means the individual is more focused on participating in various organisations to meet specific needs in the community, without engaging at the political level to address causes or options that can be contrary to the state's agenda. As such, the civic-minded route can be more restrictive and attractive.

The line between civil and civic has, indeed, become increasingly blurred and often it does not matter if both concepts, in their different forms, gain the same access to space to express themselves in the community.

That said, civil society actors often face a harder time in getting funds and finding other 'civil society' actors. They also have to strive alone. On the other hand, civic-minded activities enjoy funding, strong partnerships with the government and see their work as civil society.

This is worrying as the expectation then is to ask civil society actors to become more like the civic-minded ones as they are perceived to be one and the same thing.

The criticism of the blurring of lines centres on the idea that the appropriation of space, directly or indirectly by the State or other organs aligned closely to the State, is antithesis to the very notion of what Active Citizenry ought to be which, by my understanding, ideally refers to the citizen's freedom to articulate opinions and negotiate for their rightful position, even if it means adopting a stand that is not in line with the State. It also decreases the space for civil society actors who work from the premise of civil rights. The private and public sectors would prefer to align themselves with civic-minded groups whose main motivation is to offer help directly.

In recent years, we have witnessed the demise of civil society think tank groups, like Sintercom and Roundtable, as a result of their work being seen to be political or because the groups felt restricted in their self-expression. Their withdrawal was met with little resistance from a population that was more attuned to being watchful over organisations that provide direct services to help those in need. Nevertheless, recently, the people sector has initiated some social movements. Though much gentler than the women's movement or the workers movements of the 50s and 60s, these include the Anti-Death Penalty Campaign, Days-Off Campaign[9] for foreign domestic workers, Save Chek Jawa[10], People like Us and Section 337a[11], and community-based theatres led by The Necessary Stage and Tangent.

Towards A More Symbiotic Relationship With The State

In recent years, there have been clear calls – by the former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong – for greater citizen involvement. Lee's Harvard Club speech[12] is often

held up as a seminal piece that sheds light on how the government is viewing civil society or at the least civic-minded activism. The government has also encouraged many international groups – World Vision, Habitat for Humanity and the World Bank among them – to set up their operations here. By extension, there is some comfort that the government cannot shut down local groups that have similar goals.

More and more people are testing the limits. Singaporean youths especially are heeding the call, setting up blogs with socio-political commentaries, voicing opinions that a generation ago would have been unthinkable. New human rights groups, another taboo area, have been (informally) formed: MARUAH (Working for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism), Singapore Working Group for ASEAN and SG Human Rights.

Then there are individuals like Seelan Palay who fasted in support of Hindraf in front of the Malaysian High Commission. Opposition party member, Dr Chee Soon Juan and his sister, Chee Siok Chin are engaged in opposing the State's OB markers, calling their actions civil disobedience.[13]

For its part, the government is watchful but is less reactionary as it deals with these new norms of broadening the space for people to express their thoughts and interests.

These are exciting times. There will be many challenges as the State deals with this unstable and dynamic relationship with civil society and vice versa. New faces, new forms, new missions, new voices – civil society is slowly settling in as it searches for its own space and opportunities. I am sensing a mood where civil society and the State want to collaborate a lot more. But trust will remain an issue and it can only be built up when both sides try to remain consistent and open in their indirect and direct dialogues with each other.

For one thing, Singapore's record in certain areas – by the standards of press freedom indices, Human Rights Watch reports, Amnesty International – is not great. But with globalisation, the high level of diversity in Singapore's population and its global mobility, it makes more sense for the State to be part of the process in not just wanting these saplings under the Banyan tree – a metaphor to describe the strong state and the growing civil society below it – to take root and grow, but to also allow them be transplanted.

This challenge still remains for civil society: to be independent-minded, regardless of the State's approval, to be more assertive in shifting discussions to a rights-based approach and not to be complacent in just being civic-minded. Can civil society organisations work together to sustain strategic collaborations long enough to make a difference in the areas that interest them? The unstable relationship with the State and a private sector that takes it cue from the State will continue. But now is the moment too for activists to leverage on their growth and, over time, develop a network of coordinated and stable partners that can claim the position of being a third pillar in society. For now, civil society in Singapore is still in a catch-up phase compared to the level of collaboration that is taking place, globally, among the three sectors. ◘

[1] For theoretical discussions on the types of civil society, its roles and functions in Singapore and in Asia, see the works of academic critics in this field, which include Muthiah Alagappa, Chua Beng Huat, Gary Rodan, Terence Lim and Terence Chong.

[2] "Civil Society", Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_society> [accessed 13 May 2008]

[3] Terence Chong, "Civil Society in Singapore: Popular Discourses and Concepts" in SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia Vol. 20/2 (October 2005). Chong describes the society-state relationship as "a series of relationships between activists and State representatives situated in different locations … able to engage with each other when their interests converge and disengage when they diverge".

[4] "Those with Agenda have Entered Political Arena", The Straits Times, 24 January 1995. The then Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong sent a message on how civil society would be perceived: "You can criticize us and we would treat you as though you have entered the political arena."

[5] "Letter from K Bhavani, Press Secretary to the Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts", Today, 3 July 2006. The State's response to Mr Brown's columns was articulated in a statement released by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts in which it said Mr Brown's views distorted the truth, offered no solutions, and were neither of a higher standard nor constructive.

[6] Audrey Chin & Constance Singam, Singapore Women Re-Presented (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2004)

[7] Of the 1,500-odd 'charities' registered here, some 270 are involved in community services, about 170 in educational activities, while about 840 are of a religious nature; Andy Ho, "Revisiting the Banyan Tree- Civil Society 10 Years On", The Straits Times, 30 June 2001.

[8] Chua Beng Huat, "The Relative Autonomies of State and Civil Society in Singapore", in State-Society Relations in Singapore edited by Gillian Koh and Ooi Giok Ling (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000)

[9] The Days Off Campaign has run twice in Singapore. The first was run by Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), an advocacy group campaigning for the well-being of foreign domestic workers. The 2008 campaign is helmed by three organisations – TWC2, Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics HOME and Unifem Singapore.

[10] This was a public campaign fronted by The Nature Society to preserve the natural environment, specifically – a mangrove settlement teeming with wild life.

[11] Attempts to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code – a motion led by Nominated Member of Parliament, Siew Kum Hong to decriminalise sex between mutually consenting adult men was eventually unsuccessful.

[12] Speech by Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the Harvard Club of Singapore's 35th Anniversary Dinner – "Building A Civic Society" <http://.unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan015426.pdf>

[13] A case in point being their protests at Speakers Corner during the World Bank meeting in Singapore where the group was not arrested but held a stand-off with the police. An OB marker, short for 'out of bounds marker', is a term used in Singapore to denote what topics are permissible for public discussion and these are unclear.

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