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The Future of Singapore's Civil Society

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Civil society activists are now in open disagreement with citizens and sometimes, other civil society groups. **Gillian Koh** and **Debbie Soon** explore how that horizontal relationship might develop.

Civil society is often thought of as comprising organised social and interest groups that lie between direct kinship ties on the one hand, and the state with its institutions on the other. In its organised form, it is distinct from citizens who act in their individual capacity. In the ideal case, they promote the understanding of public issues and organise programmes and campaigns to shape the public mind and government policy.[1]

Singapore's civil society is used to the vertical civil society-to-state relationship where civil society activists, with some general consensus on a public interest issue, mount their advocacy towards the government.

Yet, a horizontal peer-to-peer relationship has developed with rival views between civil society groups and citizens on issues such as labour rights for foreign domestic workers, animal conservation with specific regard to sharks, and housing for an ageing population.

Evolution of Singapore's Civil Society

The civil society-to-state relationship has evolved over the years, from the 1980s when the government was seen as resistant to civil society, to the mid-1990s when it appeared to welcome "active citizens" and to recent acceptance of some of civil society campaigns (See box on "Vertical: Civil Society-To-State Engagement").

In recent engagements, both the day-off policy and dialogues on preservation of Bukit Brown Cemetery were fronted by the same government leader—Tan Chuan-Jin, the Minister of State of the Ministry of Manpower in the first case, and the Ministry of National Development in the second.

The day-off legislation received bouquets from civil society activists for its support for more humane worker rights; the Bukit Brown proposal on the other hand earned brickbats for what is considered a disregard for the environmental impact of road development and loss of heritage. There was also ambivalence about the longer-term goal of redeveloping the whole Bukit Brown area for housing. Activists blamed the government for not acting in good faith in its consultation process in September 2011.

The minister said that there had been a mismatch of expectations as it was only inviting input on how to build a better road with minimal impact whereas the activists wished to persuade the government to shelve the road and redevelopment plans. He said he is committed to public engagement and he sees public engagement as an end in itself as it encourages dialogue that can bring about "greater collective understanding" on issues of public interest.[14]

Public engagement will become increasingly important as civil society and Singapore citizens become more diverse. That "greater collective understanding" is not simply one to be achieved between the state and a relatively coherent civil society movement on any issue, but rather, it will find its

resolution among different public interest groups that debate each other openly (See box "Horizontal: Intra-Civil Society Engagements").

In the case of the maid's day-off campaign, some employers among the estimated 206,000 households that hire maids opposed the migrant worker and gender groups' stand on concession. Representatives of some maid employment agencies parroted them, while other agencies supported the new employment terms on the basis that they would attract more maids to Singapore. Each camp asserted its views through traditional and new media.

These episodes demonstrate the unfolding complexity in the development of a civil society in Singapore. There is a higher sense of political competency among citizens; they have greater access to media channels, and the government itself has invited citizens to engage it and other civil society groups on matters of public interest.

Will this result in greater conflict within civil society and among citizens? Will it result in the state re-asserting its role as the arbiter of interests as a "non-interested party" and the ultimate representation therefore of the country's long-term interest?[15] While government leaders assert the need for a strong state to "do what is right,"[16] a strong society is emerging with different views of just what exactly constitutes the right thing to do.

Singapore's civil society is used to the vertical civil society-to-state relationship where civil society activists, with some general consensus on a public interest issue, mount their advocacy towards the government.

Vertical: Civil Society-To-State Engagement

1980s-mid 1990s

Most of the public advocacy on issues of conscience and values in post-independence Singapore was dominated by civil society activists and organisations responding to their perceptions of government decisions at the time. In a one-party dominant state, the People's Action Party (PAP)-led government had, for a long time, an ambivalent view of civil society, perceiving it as a force that exists primarily to resist or confront the state.

Prominent Players:

Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) (1985); Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) (1991); Nature Society (Singapore) (1991, after it separated from its Malayan roots)

Mid 1990s- 2009

The government encouraged civil society and "active citizens" to take ownership of community issues and to use their resources to address them.[2] Public consultation with civil society and stakeholders became routine. The rules of operation for civil society have also been liberalised; the media, both traditional and new, increasingly allow citizens and groups to express views and mobilise support. A Nominated Member of Parliament system was introduced in 1990 through which prominent members of civil society could make their views heard in Singapore's legislature.

Prominent Players:

Gender and migrant worker issues—AWARE, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), and Humanitarian Organization for Migrant Economics (HOME);

Green and heritage conservation—Nature Society Singapore and Singapore Heritage Society;

Human rights—MARUAH and Think Centre;

Arts, and cultural policy—Theatreworks, The Necessary Stage, The Substation and Wild Rice.

Prominent Networks:

The Bloggers 13;[3] Arts Engage;[4] Singapore Anti-Death Penalty Campaigners;[5] People Like Us;[6] Pink Dot.[7]

2009-2012

After a decade of petitioning the government, migrant worker and gender groups enjoyed a triumph in March 2012 when the government announced a new law to give foreign domestic workers (always women from neighbouring developing countries) a day off every week (or monetary compensation in lieu) from 1 January 2013. However, efforts to preserve the entirety of the Bukit Brown cemetery against government plans for a road were not successful.[8]

Prominent Players: AWARE; UN Women Singapore; TWC2; HOME; Nature Society Singapore, and Singapore Heritage Society.

Horizontal: Intra-Civil Society Engagements

Day-Off Campaign (2012)

The success of vertical relations has brought about a horizontal-level reaction—those opposing the day-off legislation for foreign domestic workers, especially employers, appealed for fairer and more balanced terms of employment for themselves.[9] Through letters to the mainstream newspapers and replies from the government, gaps in knowledge and suggestions to tweak the foreign domestic worker policy were raised.[10] The tone of the published reactions of the public and some maid employment agencies towards the day-off legislation was negative. AWARE, UN Women, HOME and TWC2 responded, lauding the government's decision and encouraging the public to take a different perspective to care-giving, work, and labour rights of domestic workers.

Communal Facilities for the Elderly (2012)

The issue of an ageing society has been on the government agenda for decades. In recent years, civic advocacy groups and the state have focused on retirement income and elder-friendly living infrastructure.[11] Given its success with eldercare facilities, the government decided to introduce these on a larger scale in Woodlands and Toh Yi. Some residents, in their capacity as direct stakeholders, decried the community's loss of common space to the new housing and facilities, claiming that an area of "death houses" was being created, whilst proponents countered that the locations were ideal for seniors in terms of their accessibility.[12] Remarkably, a group of social workers created an online "in my backyard" petition to support eldercare services and communal facilities for the elderly.

Sharks Fin (2011)

The global campaign against the consumption of sharks fin has gained traction in an increasingly affluent Asia where diners prize the ingredient. The campaign in Singapore has been driven by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the local Animal Concerns, Research and Education Society (ACRES). In 2011, several supermarket chains and hotels adopted a "no sharks fin" policy. In response, some members of public have appealed for the liberty to consume sharks fin,[13] whilst experts from international groups such as Species Management Specialists and the United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wildlife Fauna and Flora have cast doubts on whether reducing the sharks fin trade to Singapore would halt the depletion of shark stocks as many other communities still consume shark meat. ACRES, WWF, Project: Fin and Shark Savers Singapore have responded by highlighting the perils to the larger ecosystem of fish stocks from the over-fishing of sharks. In April 2012, they launched a campaign to raise public awareness of the sharks fin trade in Singapore.

Whither Civil Society

Civil society represents diverse and competing interests. But where their worldviews are similar, groups may, and do collaborate to achieve common goals with shared resources. To stay true to the ethic of self-help and autonomy, it also means that groups aspire towards self-regulation—the ability to set their own rules of governance and engagement. What do we envisage for civil society in Singapore 2012 and beyond given the emerging trends described above?

Three scenarios could emerge, but the reality is likely to comprise parts of all three.

- Gridlock: This involves a situation where the state is, or becomes, less strong-fisted in shaping social mores and enforcing social discipline. The state can take on a smaller role at the broad, societal level, or just in specific policy areas. At the level of society, a higher level of liberalism results as the state retreats to avoid being burdened by overwhelming demands. Civil society groups proliferate further, forming multiple and, eventually, opposing lobbies on any one social issue. Force is often met with counter-force as citizens now feel empowered to assert their views and interests. Often though, social, cultural and economic policies are left at a standstill as the state in this liberal regime stands back to wait for some consensus to rise from grassroots before it feels it can take on that issue through public policy. It is a comfortable position for the government in its minimalist role as it ensures that basic public goods, law and order, are provided. This situation could be somewhat akin to the fifty-year long (and ongoing) struggle to reform healthcare in the United States, and the issue of same-sex marriage in the United Kingdom.

- Live and Let Live: The second scenario recognises that as people live as they choose, they must also agree to disagree with each other when consensus proves elusive. This approach often sees the intervention of a more activist authority that perceivably makes decisions of its own accord, in line with the majority view, or based on some rationale. Alternatively, individuals with irreconcilable interests can move on, perhaps by seeking out individual or private solutions to their particular situation or by negotiating mitigating policies for the minorities. One analogy to this is proselytism in multi-religious Singapore. There are groups for which proselytising is part and parcel of their religion and others that have injunctions against converting out of the religion. While the state will prosecute serious infringements on group sensitivities, individual adherents need to exercise tolerance and civility when relating to people of other faiths, especially if confronted with proselytising on a one-to-one level.[17]

- Appeal to Higher Authority: The third scenario involves the resolution of issues whether by management, regulation, or even diktat by an overarching body—organisations like the state and its institutions, or umbrella civil society organisations established ground-up to provide self-regulation or individuals with gravitas and authority over the community. These would pull contradictory impulses and interests towards a working consensus or a particular outcome. Hopefully, they take heed of interests that cannot be accommodated, and recommend mitigating steps to deal with them where possible.

- Singaporean civil society has been dominated by the third model where groups appeal to the state directly to bring about social change in the manner of vertical relations, though there are pockets of space—such as the aforesaid race and religion—where Singaporeans adopt a pragmatic "live and let live" approach. However, as Singaporeans become more vocal and start addressing each other directly, the scenario of gridlock may emerge.

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Because of the various personalities involved, it is difficult to ensure that an emerging civic sector avoids the first scenario of gridlock while moving towards alternative possibilities of toleration or resolution. The PAP has often thought of civil society as being fraught with conflict and lacking in the ability to regulate itself. This can be used to justify the regulation of the space where the government steps in to resolve disputes if conflicting groups are unable to do so themselves.[18]

The positive development of an engaged civil society will require the broader propagation of the norms of civic discourse, or "civility."

At a basic level, civility demands that the individual regards members within their organisation, community and nation as having "equal dignity in their rights and obligations as members of civil society."[19] Civility requires one to engage in dialogue in a respectful manner and with reciprocity. Civility protects the fabric of society, and it is particularly important for the second scenario, where groups agree to disagree. Civility leaves the door open for members who might previously have disagreed to work cooperatively when there happens to be a confluence of interests.

Civil society, in this context, is about transcending private interests for the common good.[20] Alternatively, as Alexis de Tocqueville explains in Democracy in America, "self interest properly understood" is the idea that if a man were to act in the interest of society, he would ultimately benefit himself. In the case of the Toh Yi episode, it is heartening to see how social workers banded together to speak for the greater common good.

Nurturing a Culture of Civility

One way is to strengthen civic education. Schools must allow a culture that welcomes "a high tolerance for engagement in public discourse and debate" to emerge, whether through pedagogy, curriculum or through co-curricular activities with experiential learning.[21]

Reaching out to Singaporeans past their school years is particularly challenging. Perhaps more may opt for a self-education process by participating in civil society activities as members of civil society organisations. The Agree to Disagree Handbook[22] is an example of a code of norms tailored for a particular membership. These norms need to be stated, lived and propagated by activists. We will have succeeded when not only "formal" members of civil society organisations, but ordinary Singaporeans take on that "big citizen" mentality to speak up for pro-social behaviour, interests, and public policy.

Another approach is through the exercise of leadership, whether at the individual or organisational level, to achieve the self-regulation and management described in the third scenario above. The German philosopher Hegel saw the propensity for civil society to be unstable at times and suggested the intervention of the state to guide these interests.[23] While the hand of the state can be an essential steadying force in certain situations, perhaps Hegel's conception can be expanded beyond government to neutral and respected members of civil society in the Singapore context today and in the years ahead. These persons should ideally have no vested interest in an issue, yet have a good grasp of the finer points of it to facilitate the optimal resolution for all. There are several such individuals in Singapore today (we think of Professor Tommy Koh, Dr Kanwaljit Soin, Ms Braema Mathi), but a younger generation needs to be nurtured and given the opportunity to develop their skills and their networks.

The Bukit Brown affair could have benefitted from the intervention of a person with such gravitas, a person who could be viewed as a trusted broker among the different parties.

Yet another approach has to do with building broader networks among civil society organsations. More than a decade ago, members of a disparate set of civil society organisations and individual activists built an experimental network they called The Working Committee to explore ways to collaborate better with each other.[24] It lasted a

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year between 1998 and 1999. As some members have explained, the committee "arose out of a conviction that a strong civil society with active horizontal linkages would complement the vertical linkages between the people sector and the state; and would lead to an enhanced understanding of the accountability of the state."[25] For the members of the network, it was a very fruitful experience for the sharing of information between each other, but it was challenging to establish governing principles for a "fluid network, capable of accepting many diverse initiatives with multiple centres and multiple leaderships for multiple initiatives" as well as a "non-hierarchical, process-oriented philosophy."[26]

The future of Singapore's civil society could be shaped by the emergence of another Working Committee (or many such networks) to provide a focal point for fostering civic norms, and leadership development. Today, groups working in the human trafficking space are gathering to form a network to promote collaboration and further activism. The local civil society scene would benefit from the formation of such alliances on other issues.

Kevin Tan of Singapore Heritage Society once said: "Civil society is a manifestation of…higher energies of individuals. It is from their desire to do some good for themselves and their wider community, the craving to better the lives of their fellow citizens, and the aspiration to right a perceived wrong, that compels them to form associations, mobilise ground forces and engage in public discourse."

In the future, if a conflict were to occur (and it will occur) between groups that argue for different ways to achieve a social good or to choose among competing social goods, we should have in place organisations and mechanisms to ensure that, ultimately, society is not harmed by that.

The fact that Singapore has been exceptional for its racial and religious harmony bodes well for its potential to bridge other differences of opinions and all manner of social fault lines. This success has come about from canny government management and civic education; from both laws and policies that create an almost instinctive respect for other races and religions while they nurture a safe space for leaders to facilitate interracial and interreligious dialogue. The emergence of the same energies, modalities of working together, trust and reciprocity among groups can help Singaporeans define and promote a compassionate and inclusive society. Surely, no one could argue against that.

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[1] Citizens loosely aligned to such groups or movements can be considered civil society activists. Others who comment publicly on government policy or public issues primarily as affected parties have every right to do so but are not usually thought of as part of civil society.

[2] The government declared it did not have a monopoly on wisdom in dealing with all the complex issues of the day and welcomed expert and grounded views from civil society to shape policy and implementation.

[3] Blogger 13 is a representation to the government in its review on Internet regulation in 2008.

[4] Arts Engage is a network of arts practitioners from various disciplines who discuss public policy that impinges on their respective practices.

[5] The network organised vigils against the death penalty.

[6] The network pushed for gay rights.

[7] Many of these networks mobilise through the internet and social media.

[8] In the green and heritage conservation space, the SHS and NSS and five other groups campaigned for the preservation of the Bukit Brown cemetery when the government announced in September 2011 it would exhume some graves to build a road to relieve traffic congestion around it. In March 2012, the government conceded to concerns about the impact to the ecosystem by planning a bridge along a stretch of the proposed area. It had earlier already said it would sponsor the digital documentation of graves to be exhumed to preserve the memory of them. The groups were, naturally, disappointed.

[9] See also Wai Chie, "Be Fair to Employers in Debate on Maids' Day Off," *The Straits Times*, 18 March 2012.

[10] For instance, some employers said it was unfair to be responsible for misdeeds of maids resulting from the new liberties. The government clarified that since the start of 2010, employers were no longer liable for a breach in work permit conditions from maids' own behaviour. Another example is the suggestion for greater propagation of flexible work arrangements to help families cope without a maid or the new day-off rule.

[11] Studio apartments with eldercare facilities were first introduced as a public housing option in 2001. This category of housing allows seniors to downgrade and realise the value of larger flats, for elder-friendly smaller apartments with provision of elder-care services by voluntary welfare organisations co-located with the flats.

[12] See Janice Tai, "Facilities for Elderly Not Welcome Here Either," *The Straits Times*, 9 February 2012.

   Janice Tai & Peter Wong, "Unease over elder-care centre in void decks," *The Straits Times*, 3 February 2012.

[13] Colin Loh, "Don't curb our taste for shark's fin soup," *The Straits Times*, 7 January 2012.

[14] Li Xueying and Grace Chua, " 'No regrets' over Bukit Brown effort," *The Straits Times*, 30 March 2012.

[15] Terence Chong, "Embodying Society's Best: Hegel and the Singapore State," in *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol.36, No.3 (2006).

[16] Teo Chee Hean, Speech at The 2012 Administrative Service Dinner And Promotion Ceremony at Shangri-La Hotel, 27 March 2012.

[17] Citing Buddhist tenets, Singapore's Buddhist community, for instance, has published a guide titled *Agree to Disagree: Conversations on Conversions* which gently says "no" to proselytising in an agreeable, compassionate way.

[18] In giving his reading of civil society in Singapore at the time, Mr George Yeo, then Minister for Trade and Industry said, "What we are now seeing is a new mutually reinforcing relationship between the state and society. While the Singapore state supports the growth of civil organisations, the state has not got total control over them…we do need more bottom-up initiative to achieve a better balance between state and society. Old instincts sometimes die hard. Without top-down direction, many civic organisations are plagued by internal disputes. There are deep cultural reasons for this. The separation of powers is not a tradition in Asian society. Without central leadership, many Asian societies do not hold together naturally…"

   George Yeo, "Worldwide Web: Strengthening the Singapore Network," in Gillian Koh and Ooi Giok Ling (eds.), *State-Society Relations in Singapore* (Eastern University Press and Institute of Policy Studies, 2003).

[19] Edward Shils, "The Virtue of Civil Society," *Government and Opposition*, 26 (1991).

[20] Ibid, page 16-17.

[21] Ooi Giok Ling, "Good Governance, Civic Education and Civil Society," in Print, M., Ellickson-Brown, J., and Baginda, A. R., *Civic Education for Civil Society* (Asean Academic Press, 1999).

[22] Debbie Tan et.al.. *Agree to Disagree: Conversations on Conversions*, http://conversion.buddhists.sg/.

[23] Muthiah Alagappa, "Civil Society and Political Change: An analytical framework," in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), 2004, *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, page 25-57.

[24] Constance Singam, Tan Chong Kee, Tisa Ng and Leon Perera (eds.), *Building Social Space in Singapore*, (Select Publishing, 2002).

[25] Leon Perera and Tisa Ng, "First Steps: The Need to Do Something," in Constance Singam et. al (eds.) *Building Social Space in Singapore* (Select Publishing, 2002).

[26] Ibid.

[27] Kevin Tan, K, "Understanding and Harnessing Ground Energies in Civil Society," in Gillian Koh and Ooi Giok Ling (eds.), *State-Society Relations in Singapore* (Eastern University Press and Institute of Policy Studies, 2003), page 99.