

Singapore Management University

## Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

---

Research Collection Yong Pung How School Of  
Law

Yong Pung How School of Law

---

7-2009

### Our shared stake

Tan K. B. EUGENE

*Singapore Management University, eugene@smu.edu.sg*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol\\_research](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol_research)



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), and the [Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons](#)

---

#### Citation

EUGENE, Tan K. B.. Our shared stake. (2009). *SALT*. 8-11.

Available at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol\\_research/3729](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol_research/3729)

This Magazine Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Yong Pung How School of Law at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection Yong Pung How School Of Law by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email [cherylds@smu.edu.sg](mailto:cherylds@smu.edu.sg).



**It's the time of the active citizen. Recent spurts of collective campaigning have mobilised surprising ground support. EUGENE TAN analyses the coming of age of civil society here through the passionate and visible advocacy of certain groups in recent events.**

**W**hat do the recent, various debates and public controversies in Singapore on an eclectic array of issues share in common? Consider the AWARE leadership struggle, Section 377A of the Penal Code, legalising casino gaming, the Serangoon Gardens residents dispute over workers' dormitories, Chek Jawa, and transient foreign workers.

All are issues that inspired collective activism and ignited exuberant advocacy, and, at times, strident and vociferous debate. Most of all, perhaps unusually for Singapore, these issues mobilised visible, articulate and confrontational support.

Civil society, represented by organised interest groups, sought to engage fellow citizens, other civil society organisations, and the government on these issues. Our civic imaginations were challenged over the possibilities, problems and provocations thrown up by determined supporters, vigorous activism, and passionate debates.

Indeed, it is precisely civic engage-

ment and experience, covering the broad spectrum of informal and formal associations to champion and encourage involvement in social platforms, that can help in the development of a country's shared community space and our sense of belonging.

Often, different value positions are better understood through challenges that are strongly aired. Even if there is no resolution to the differences, at the very least, the different actors would be exposed to contrasting viewpoints, value systems and propositions.

#### **TROUBLE AT AWARE**

It began innocently enough as an internal, "domestic spat". The recent AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research) controversy that played out in a few short but intense weeks between March and May this year, subsequently turned into a dispute acted out on a national stage.

The dispute quickly transformed into a contest for survival of two executive council groups against a dramatic backdrop of accusations, death threats, mud-slinging, and concerted actions by the protagonist camps to rally supporters to sign up as members to attend an Extraordinary General Meeting.

The "AWARE saga" shoved civil society into the public eye. It raised many questions about the role of civil society, and how it should operate in our society. Hot button issues such as religion and politics and government intervention were thrown in for good measure.

Home Affairs Minister Mr Wong Kan Seng found the media coverage of the saga "extensive and breathless", but regarded some of the reporting as "not sufficiently balanced". New media (such as blogs, Web 2.0, Twitter, and a 24/7 cyberspace of observers and participants) plugged in. It added a new, gritty edge to

traditional forms of civil society activism and support mobilisation.

As a leading women's organisation, those in control of AWARE could potentially be well-placed to set the agenda and influence the direction and focus of this well established "blue-chip" civil society organisation. For the "new Guard", securing leadership in AWARE would have enabled them to moderate what they saw as AWARE's apparent excesses and liberal inclinations. That in itself would have been considered an important moral victory and facilitated the professed right-sizing of AWARE to its supposed original purpose.

Because of the issues at stake and the constituencies affected, the squabble within AWARE naturally drew into the fray various groupings including gay individuals and activist groups, and those opposed to homosexuality, concerned parents with school-going children, and groups of Christians.

The ante was also raised as the various recasting of entire categories of people connected with the AWARE saga, were deemed inaccurate, unacceptable, or discriminatory by the stakeholders themselves. There was also the palpable concern over allegations of mixing religion with secular matters.

#### **THE PLAYING FIELD**

Prior to this, civil society was already showing renewed vigour and promise with new interest groups being formed whether or not they were registered under the Societies Act, the main legislation governing civil society organisations. The enactment of the Public Order Act in mid-April signalled the gradual and monitored liberalisation of political space, and the parameters governing recreational and social activities.

This was in line with a maturing civil society, and the political intent to give Singaporeans more political space to exercise their rights of speech, assembly, and association without compromising stability within the society.

In some respects, what happened in AWARE reflected the prominent fault-lines and reputed divides in Singaporean society. The issues surrounding the

leadership tussle within AWARE, while seemingly resolved for now, point to the evolving diversity and innate complexity in our fast-changing society.

At the same time, the shoulder-rub of seemingly unrelated issues in the AWARE controversy suggests that the necessary and growing diversity of our society may be a potential 'battle-ground' in the years ahead. At its core, this clash—if not chasm—has its root in values. Specifically, the debate and challenge centred on the sort of values that Singapore should promote, be identified with, and oppose.

The AWARE dispute showed that Singaporeans are willing to exercise their freedom of association and speech, and see civil society as a platform from which they can promote or defend their interests and causes. So what is civil society?

#### **WHAT IS CIVIL SOCIETY?**

In essence, civil society is the voluntary associational life between the family and institutions of the state. The space that civil society occupies is one that is voluntary and plural in nature. It represents the citizen's freedom to associate in relation to the state. Conventionally, civil society is related to the state – it is apart from the state, but not necessarily in opposition with the state.

**The importance of civil society to democracies is worth underlining: Its absence would invariably signal the absence of freedoms of association that are needed for democratic engagement.**



The importance of civil society to democracies is worth underlining: Its absence would invariably signal the absence of democracy as well as the freedoms of association that are needed for democratic engagement. It is in civil society and the space it occupies that individuals or groups come together to pursue a common purpose.

Civil society's relevance to political life lies in its potential to contribute to public discussion and debate on what is democratically desirable and politically permissible. In so doing, it generates public opinion distinct and apart from the state. It is also engaged in a process of dialogue, both creative and critical, with other civil society actors, the public, and the state.

We are likely to see the passing existence of some groups as well as sustained engagement, mobilisation and participation of other groups. There will be private interest advocates as well as those engaged in wider, public interests that may have political implications. Some types of civic engagement, such as social welfare delivery, will be relatively risk-free. Others that deal with socio-political issues will have to operate carefully even as our political system becomes more liberal.

#### **CIVIL SOCIETY UNDER THE BANYAN TREE**

The government here has preferred to describe civil society as "civic society", or the "people sector". This suggests the space for associations and its related freedoms, will have to be conceived and practised differently in Singapore than elsewhere. Indeed, civic society is seen in pragmatic and community terms.

In 1991, then Acting Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, saw civic society as a necessary ingredient in creating "a complete soul" for a young nation-state in a rapidly globalising world with multiple loyalties. He argued that by anchoring individuals and families to Singapore, a strong civic society would help make Singapore a home, rather than a hotel.

In seeking to make life better for themselves and fellow Singaporeans, affections and traditions are developed, giving

citizens "their sense of place and involvement in the larger community" regardless of whether they are in Singapore or not.

Mr Yeo noted the "banyan tree effect" where if "state institutions are too pervasive, civic institutions cannot thrive". But he also observed that while the banyan tree has to be pruned, that had to be done judiciously since "we cannot do without the banyan tree".

In a speech to the Harvard Club in January 2004, then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, developed on the role of civic society in 21st century Singapore. He acknowledged Singapore society has to "open up further", promoting "further civic participation" and "progressively widen(ing) the limits of openness". These are inevitable even as the out-of-bounds (OB) markers persist.

Assuring that the government will "do its utmost to build a civic society" and adopt a consultative style of governance, Mr Lee said that the government "will promote a political culture which responds to people's desire for greater participation, in a manner which supports Singapore's growth as a nation".

While the government would cut the apron strings, Mr Lee also emphasised we would have to develop our own kind of civic society as "we will not ape others blindly and do something simply because it appears fashionable".

Mr Lee encouraged Singaporeans to take on active citizenry with gusto, noting that civic participation "involves many helping hands in many areas" ranging from high policies to social work, self-help groups, the arts, or our daily lives.

It is clear that Singapore seeks a rational, issue-centred, educated, informed and active citizenry. Increasingly, the interests, needs, and concerns of citizens will be articulated and addressed through avenues and ways not linked directly with the political parties or the government.

It remains to be seen if civic activism will evolve into a social movement here. It would appear that the liberal concept of civil society as a check on the government has not gained traction with the powers-that-be.

What is more likely to take firmer root is the concept of civil society as a

partner in active citizenry, and as one of the "many helping hands" in social welfare assistance and delivery, volunteerism, and philanthropy.

A distinction seems to be drawn between social and political engagement. The abiding concern with stability suggests that civil society can be a potential threat if its focus is only on political engagement. As Law Minister Mr K Shanmugum put it starkly: "Stability for us is an existential issue – both economically and as a society." But the current thinking is that civil/civic society will remain essential in our nation-building quest.

### WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT CIVIL SOCIETY?

Civil society has many virtues. First, it engages citizens in issues that they feel are important and want to contribute to. Citizens who participate in policy-making can help in the policy-making and implementation process.

Second, an individual's involvement in various aspects of community life enhances the quality of life for Singaporeans. It helps develop community interests by bonding like-minded people in shared activities.

Third, active citizens help deepen a sense of rootedness and can enhance the stake that individuals have in a country. Associational life also helps sustain

**A destructive effect of a bad civil society is when an attitude of mutual benefit is not practised, and one side tries to dictate the terms of the discourse and railroad the outcome.**



common values and community life in a plural society. Cooperation with others can grow the social capital for a common civic culture and value-system to thrive.

Fourth, civil society can act as a key dialogue partner with the state through critical debate in the public space. This promotes accountability in government and civil society as both sides have to pursue their agendas in a responsible manner. Often, both players will adopt innovative ways to further their agendas, and promote their causes.

It is this process of careful, democratic discussion – the mutual exchange of ideas, views, and critiques – that has tremendous potential in scaling up civic dialogue, debate and participation by citizens in areas they deem important.

Such a process should result in the positive outcome of more and better governance but, paradoxically, with less government. After all, governments do not have a monopoly on wisdom and know-how.

### THE DARK SIDE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society is not necessarily apolitical – it is not disinterested or unconcerned with politics. Civil society is the way a society acts towards a common purpose, and also how it influences ideals and views, and develops desired values and norms.

It is hardly surprising that civil society is a contested space. It is populated by a variety of groups, some of which may have a particular, malevolent and individual interest and objectives that may be inward-looking, or which may not promote democratic citizenship.

Such a state of affairs should not surprise us since pluralism cannot be strait-jacketed, especially in a space where participation, autonomy and freedom are critical. We have, and will continue to see, civic groups motivated and slanted towards goals that may be too particular and self-serving.

Going forth, as Singapore becomes more diverse, the challenges and debate will invariably be over values, especially moral and religious ones. Challenge will increasingly shift towards more subtle differences and will centre on value

systems, and how the support or objection to such value systems will be fought over.

As we seek to develop the common and shared space, we need to be alive to the dark side of civil society. In Singapore's context, this dark side is the potential to undermine or destroy the foundation of community spirit in our society – such as multiracialism and meritocracy. It can also weaken the quality of democracy and participation. "Bad" civil society impoverishes and destroys the social capital all citizens invest in – our relationships of trust and mutual benefit.

Since Singapore emphasises a harmonious society, open conflict and confrontation are frowned on. Nonetheless, in the AWARE saga, brash in-your-face advocacy and activism, publicity-seeking histrionics, and inducing moral panic, were all par for the course. Amid the passionate advocacy and exuberant debate was the ugly resort to threats, insults, and a holier-than-thou attitude. This does not speak well of our budding civil society.

For sure, some messiness, dispute, and differences are all part and parcel of civil society. But assertive demonstrations must not take on the dimensions of a zero-sum game, and disregard the central importance of being mindful of the differences within our society. The larger good of society is another important consideration.

As a society, we urgently need to learn how to avoid conflicts over diversity in our society, and when they do occur, how to manage such conflicts if we cannot resolve them. Norms of civility, or the rules of engagement, are how we manage differences, and agree to disagree with very different people and values in a shared space.

It requires deliberate, cultivated restraint. This is especially so when the conflicts and disagreements are stubborn, with starting points so uncompromising, that decisive resolution cannot be expected. Then, an attitude of "live and let live" has to prevail.

Crucially, civility underscores the value and need for mutual benefit. Reciprocity incorporates good faith and recognises other people, including those who may hold very different views

and values. A destructive effect of a bad civil society is when an attitude of mutual benefit is not practised, and one side tries to dictate the terms of the discourse and railroad the outcome.

Worse, fear, prejudice, hate, bigotry, and even violence are promoted in an attempt to remove the differences, or to assert moral superiority over a competing viewpoint. If civil society here is unable to self-regulate, then the authorities will step in. This would be a severe setback for our fledgling civil society.

**If civil society here is unable to self-regulate, then the authorities will step in. This would be a severe setback... The bottom line is that civil society actors must resist thinking and operating in narrow, self-interested ways stemming from a sense of moral superiority.**



### A JOINT STAKE

The bottom line is that civil society actors must resist thinking and operating in narrow, self-interested ways stemming from a sense of moral superiority. In disagreements over values, we should not insist that any concession, where given, is an admission of the giver's inferior moral standing.

By the same token, civil society actors must strenuously avoid demonising their "opponents". Such rigid, moral logic only undermines the heart of civil society as a space for associations directed by tolerance, autonomy, respect, and dignity.

We should observe the "belief-action distinction". Singaporeans are entitled to their beliefs and values, and to promote them so long as they do not offend the law. But actions flowing from such beliefs and values must not offend against the obligation of maintaining and improving the foundation principles of our society.

In some respects, the AWARE controversy is a blessing in disguise. It brought to the fore issues that have been simmering in some quarters, and provided an opportunity for those concerns to be vented. It vividly demonstrated that Singaporeans do care and can be counted on to protect and promote passionately, the values and causes that they believe in. Of course, there were actions by the protagonists that did not speak well. It is a learning journey for all concerned.

The government showed restraint, offering its counsel discreetly and objectively. Another civil society actor, the National Council of Churches of Singapore, helped to cool temperatures by stating unequivocally that it did not condone churches getting involved in AWARE's internal dispute. More importantly, it also counselled against "pulpits being used" in the dispute.

The civil society landscape here will continue to be diverse, complex and contested. The forms of civic participation will evolve and change with time to meet multi-faceted needs and rising expectations.

Regardless of the nature of activity, civic engagement and its demands of commitment, sacrifice and time, will be hallmarks of a vibrant and thriving civil society. We all have a stake in it. ☆



The writer is Assistant Professor of Law, School of Law, at The Singapore Management University.