

## Report on IPS Conference on Civil Society 2013: “Our Future” 11 November 2013

By Tay Ek Kiat and Debbie Soon  
*IPS Research Assistants*

Fifteen years after its first Conference on Civil Society in 1998, more than 300 participants gathered at the Grand Copthorne Waterfront Hotel on 11 November to take part in the Institute of Policy Studies’ (IPS) Conference on Civil Society 2013.

This year’s conference was titled “Our Future”, and invited civil society activists and thought leaders to take stock of developments in the sector and analyse how these have shaped society and public policymaking. The conference also explored ideas for cultivating the sort of vibrant civil society that fosters social capital, trust and cohesion. The conference ended with a dialogue with the Guest-of-Honour, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Law Mr K Shanmugam.

IPS Director, Mr Janadas Devan opened the conference by narrating a brief history of the term “civil society”, from its classical beginnings to the contemporary definition — referring to the sphere that lies between government and family. In the Singapore context, he noted that widespread public interest was raised by former Minister George Yeo in 1991, when he famously used the “banyan tree” analogy to refer to the government that seemed to overshadow civil society since Independence.



Mr Devan recounted that IPS Special Adviser, Professor Tommy Koh, had taken the analogy one step further at the conference in 1998 by using the tembusu tree instead to characterise the relationship between the government and civil society under the Goh Chok Tong Administration. The tembusu has a leaner canopy that allows for undergrowth. Mr Devan wondered however if the era of the banyan tree was truly over as Singaporeans in 2013 seemed to expect the government to play an ever larger role in the provision of public goods and in dealing with issues such as poverty.

He concluded by suggesting that the growth in Singapore is more that of political society than civil society, and expressed hope that the conference could provide a good platform to take stock and review developments that have taken place since 1998.

## SESSION ONE: CHANGE

*Chairperson: Professor Kishore Mahbubani, Dean, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy*

### Technology

*Speaker: Dr Carol Soon, Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies*

Dr Soon discussed how the proliferation of Internet and technology had led to a change in the nature of civic actors as well as the forms of civic activism.

*Email and instant messaging (IM):* As the Internet's basic tools of communication, Web 2.0 technologies have rapidly gained popularity, with 70 per cent of the Singapore population communicating using IM and social media. These tools are easy to use, low-cost, and offer interactivity and reach. Civil society organisations have become adept at using technology to further their causes and complement offline or real-world initiatives.

*New breed of actors:* Previously, actors were represented by formal organisations, with the Singapore government deciding which ones were licensed. Technology has provided the platforms for citizens to become agenda-setters and lowered the barriers to civic engagement.



*New tactics:* Civil society deals with three major areas of advocacy: bread-and-butter issues, human rights, and interest-specific issues. The Internet has greatly enhanced activists' ability to create bottom-up campaigns, in which internet technology is sometimes main and often the only mode of advertising. However, Dr Soon emphasised how cross-posting has ensured that campaigns have greater impact, showing a chart of past civic campaigns and the media that were used.

On activation, Dr Soon argued that the Internet increased the ease with which one connects to like-minded others, particularly in the sharing of grievances and information. These interactions in turn have allowed for the building of partnerships, community and solidarity. Here, the example of online community groups for the LGBT (lesbians-gays-bisexuals-transsexuals) community was raised, with these groups functioning as a space for safe and non-discriminatory sharing within the community.

On the other hand, the Internet increases misinformation and online clutter; local policymakers have warned that this may damage the social fabric. However, while noise may increase the perceived fragmentation among the online community, it was pointed out that positive movements are possible — the Singapore Haze Rescue movement, individuals speaking out against xenophobia and racism online, and the reaction to the "Anonymous" campaign were examples of that.

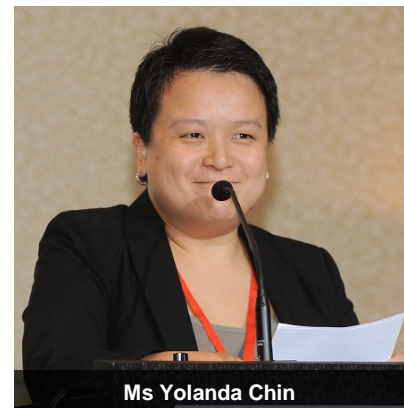
Dr Soon concluded by saying that the future of civil society is one of great change. As always, in the art of communication, civic actors need to realise that they must speak a language that resonates with the public and that moves their hearts and minds, in order to be successful.

## **People**

*Speaker: Ms Yolanda Chin, Research Fellow, Centre of Excellence for Security, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University*

Ms Chin addressed the question of what civil society could do to mitigate social tensions between Singaporeans and foreigners. She prefaced her answer by first defining civil society as associational life and civic engagement, which possesses bonds of trust, co-operation and interaction; this leads to a healthy associational ecosystem in the pursuit of common goals and interests. In this respect, civil society provides more platforms for people to come together, ideally leading to greater cross-cultural understanding and fewer conflicts.

However, there are limitations to what civil society can achieve. Ms Chin pointed out that much of local-foreign tension is likely driven by anxieties stemming from the unfulfilled aspirations of locals, along with policy and infrastructural shortcomings that have shown up with the higher rate of immigration into Singapore, rather than the result of a clash of cultures. The debate on the Population White Paper was raised as an example: a common refrain was that people were upset with government policies rather than foreigners per se, suggesting that problems did not stem from the lack of understanding.



If affordable housing, efficient public transport and desirable jobs were widely available despite high immigration rates, such issues would not affect the local population as much. In this way, it is clear that there are some issues that are beyond the power of civil society and voluntary action — the onus then falls upon the state to these sorts of problems, real or perceived.

Ms Chin rounded off by sharing some thoughts and questions about civil society in Singapore. She wondered what people hoped to achieve through civil society, and whether it would be an end in itself or a means to an end; whether voluntary associations would be best suited to reform society; and to what extent collective action in Singapore would be for the good of all, as opposed to specific groups of citizens. She shared a quotation of Michael Edwards' 2004 publication *Civil Society*: "The idea of civil society remains compelling, not because it provides the tidiest of explanations but because it speaks to the best in us, and calls on the best in use to respond in kind."

## **Politics**

*Speaker: Professor Walter Woon, David Marshall Professor for Law and Deputy Chairman, Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore*

Prof. Woon, speaking in his personal capacity, said there are four factors he believed would deeply influence politics and the future of civil society, as well as the relationship between the government and society: population density; the composition of the population; technology; and education.

On population density, he said that Singapore could be the most crowded country on earth with a density of 7,400 people/km<sup>2</sup>, and with the projections of the White Paper, there is the potential that it might reach 10,000 people/km<sup>2</sup> in 2030. One consequence of this would be people jostling not only for physical space, but public space too. Different interest groups would find themselves in competition with one another and with the government.

On population composition, Prof. Woon pointed to interest groups of minorities such as the LGBT community and its lobby to abolish Section 377A<sup>1</sup>, along with the counter-lobby defending the status quo. Furthermore, while new citizens and immigrants may not overtly organise themselves into groups, Singaporeans sometimes take up their causes, as seen in civil society groups that advocate rights for foreign workers. The existence of these groups will lead to competition, and in some cases locals will find that foreigners do not share a similar ethos in the areas of conflict and resolution — as evident in the SMRT bus drivers’ strike in November 2012.



Prof Walter Woon

On technology, Prof. Woon agreed that technology magnifies voices and makes it easy to create interest groups. Where previously people may have found their opinions to be voices in the wilderness, the Internet and information technology now allow people to hear echoes from other like-minded individuals — a lone wolf joins a pack.

On education, Prof. Woon referred to the Singapore Pledge, noting the line “...to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality”. One should not be surprised that people take this seriously, particularly the younger, more educated generation, which tends to be sceptical about Singaporean governance and the political system; younger civil servants also have a strong sense of fairness and justice, which may change the way the government reacts to civil society in future.

Anecdotally, there have been more court cases challenging the government in the last five years than the 30 to 40 years before that, showing that the reluctance of citizens to challenge the government has dissipated somewhat. To its credit, the government has also shown greater willingness to accommodate such views, showing a possible change from its traditional approach of controlling civil society with an “iron fist in an iron glove”. Overall, Prof. Woon cautioned that the idea of the rule of law may be important, but it would be just as important that people develop the skill to compromise and accept neutral adjudication, in order to continue to live harmoniously together on such a crowded island.

---

1. Section 377A refers to the local law that criminalises consensual sexual acts between men.

## Discussion

Chairperson Prof. Mahbubani asked whether the role of civil society in the coming years should increase or decrease. Dr Soon responded that it was a matter of "would" rather than



(L-R): Dr Soon, Prof Mahbubani, Ms Chin and Prof Woon during the discussion

"should". She expressed her belief that it would grow in importance; that a greater contestation of views was an important part of nation-building, and that it was important for people to advocate for their civil rights.

Dr Chin agreed that the proliferation of more associations was beneficial, indicating people were pursuing their own ideas of a good life. However, she warned that civil society should never be used as a crutch for poor governance or ineffective policies, and it was important to clarify the roles of each sector.

Prof. Woon likewise believed that an increase in civil society's role was inevitable because people's interests would clash. Unless the government decided to revert to the role of a "strangler fig" in controlling (and even stifling) civil society, the latter would certainly play a much greater role in the years to come.

A participant commented that Dr Soon had not touched on some major developments when covering the effects of technology and the Internet: the Brompton bikes and AIM saga that surfaced on the Internet and forced more accountability from the government, and the arrest of the *Demon-critic Singapore* cartoonist Leslie Chew for sedition. The former was arguably more positive, while the latter showed increased repression.

To this, Dr Soon agreed that the government has taken heed of civil society voices and is using tools to try and arrive at order amid disorder. She raised the example of the new unit set up under the National Heritage Board on heritage and conservation issues as an acknowledgement of the greater need for engagement. Nonetheless, the government has made clear that certain lines or boundary markers have been set even if there are critical voices that test those bounds. However, the community generally relies on self-regulation.

Another participant asked if civil servants could be allowed to join civil society organisations. Here, Ms Chin drew a distinction between "can" and "should", noting that the state would allow it if this made civil servants active in engagement and if the activities did not challenge government; however, transformative change may not be seen as acceptable by the state.

Another member of the audience questioned what Prof. Woon meant by fairness, pointing out that Prof. Woon's ideas seemed predicated on procedural fairness, but there were other concepts such as distributional fairness that were less discussed. Prof. Woon answered that this was a question of philosophy, and that people would try to influence public policy in any direction they considered fair. He argued that officialdom is not deaf to such concerns, and public servants were now more willing to take into account what people were feeling. As such, the direction taken by the leadership going forward may be different from the past.

An audience member commented that the notion of civic society is undergirded by civic culture, and that virtual pressure groups with no face-to-face interaction might be detrimental to civic culture. What then would be the impact of rising civic activism online on civic culture in general? Dr Soon replied that she had conducted a study of trust and social influence in different networks online and offline, finding that greater trust and solidarity exists between those that had already met offline. Nonetheless, she also explained that there was much fluidity between online and offline movements; the challenge for future activists would thus be to mobilise people and have them be physically present for events rather than being "slacktivists" sitting behind their keyboards.

A participant from the Singapore Kindness Movement asked if there was a timeframe for Singapore to engage in discussion with civility, and if there was any one compelling interest that could bind the civil society together. On the former, Ms Chin observed that no society had achieved such a goal and thus it was not likely to ever happen here. She added that people who speak up about issues tend to be very passionate, and we should thus focus on the content of the views rather than the form in which they are expressed.

With regard to a binding interest, Prof. Woon also believed that there was no such interest. He expressed his hope that Singapore would be able to hand over a "good society" to the next generation, with the defining feature being the willingness of people to compromise. The "brat response" of refusing to move and reiterating one's viewpoint should be collectively opposed.

Finally, a member of the audience asked how we should prepare the younger generation for dissent. Ms Chin, drawing from her experience as a teacher, noted that teachers tended to be prescriptive, often taking big motherhood statements as true. She advocated helping the younger generation think about what they want and to be prepared to defend their views; and reforming the education system to create a supportive environment for students to do that.

## SESSION TWO: CONTINUITY

*Chairperson: Associate Professor Cherian George, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information and Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies*

### Engagement

*Speaker: Ms Faizah Jamal, Nominated Member of Parliament*

Ms Faizah spoke on the topic of engagement, specifically with respect to her experience of civic activism as member of the Nature Society of Singapore. She began by explaining issues in the preservation of nature and greenery in Singapore — in particular, the differing definitions of “green spaces” by park users and nature advocates as well as the idea of “different shades of green”, encompassing the different natural areas available to Singaporeans, from nature reserves to cultivated parks and golf courses. Different people view “green spaces” with different lenses.

Ms Faizah then gave a brief historical overview of the various nature campaigns she had taken part in since the early 1990s, beginning with the successful campaign to stop the government from turning Lower Peirce Nature Reserve into a golf course. This was noteworthy because the public education campaign, along with the door-to-door petition-signing, garnered over 17,000 signatures before the advent of the Internet.

The next campaign covered was for Pulau Ubin’s Chek Jawa in 2002, where nature lovers again petitioned the government to not go ahead with proposed land reclamation works, citing Chek Jawa’s rich marine wildlife and biodiversity. Here, nature lovers collaborated with local academics to conduct public education and, through word of mouth, saw 2,000 people turning up for the petition. The government declared a 10-year moratorium period on land reclamation there, and no additional plans have surfaced since the period expired in 2012.



Ms Faizah Jamal

More recently, issues of conservation were brought up in 2012, when the government announced plans to exhume part of Bukit Brown cemetery — the full cemetery hosts graves of prominent pioneers of Singapore and rich birdlife and fauna — to make way for an eight-lane highway; the Nature Society worked with non-nature civil society groups for the first time. In response to the Population White Paper and Land Use Plan released in early 2013, the Nature Society also released a Position Paper detailing its stand on issues such as additional land reclamation works and the future carbon footprint of Singapore.

Ms Faizah argued that the relationship between civil society and the government had evolved slowly but surely towards collaboration. She cited the Land Transport Authority as a clear example of this, wherein activists worked with government officials to provide recommendations through a better understanding of each other’s positions. She said that the Nature Society is looking forward to giving its input on a long-term proposal for a cross-island MRT line. Here, she stressed the importance of communication between parties, noting that conveying concerns properly while providing viable alternatives would be an important way to conduct future collaboration.

Finally, Ms Faizah stressed how building trust is a two-way process, and postulated that the future would bring more tension not only between civil society and the government, but also between other groups outside of the government, such as sports groups and nature groups competing for use of space. What is important is to discover and use the language of engagement.

### **Collaboration**

*Speaker: Mr Alvin Tan, Artistic Director, The Necessary Stage*

Mr Tan discussed collaboration, what he called the "quiet riot for new possibilities", and changing social relations in the way civil society works with the government. He began by observing that the culture in Singapore is authority-oriented and hierarchical, since authorities possess the resources. This, he argued, creates a culture of entitlement and looking up to power, causing movements and groups to have a relative lack of stamina compared to elsewhere.

Mr Tan then drew upon his personal experiences as founder of theatre company The Necessary Stage (TNS), and described how the company had worked across its differences with the government over the years. He narrated various significant events in the history of TNS, beginning with its inception in 1987 under the shadow of the alleged Marxist Conspiracy and detention of 22 people. TNS was questioned by the Registrar of Societies for its work, and had faced difficulties in its founding and right through the 1990s.

Mr Tan related the example of the play *Off Centre* in 1993, which was initially commissioned by the Singapore Ministry of Health. The play was deemed to show another ministry in a bad light and government grants were withdrawn. TNS put on the play despite the lack of funding, which Mr Tan remarked showed how difficult it was for the government to understand passion for the craft. Forum theatre was also banned in Singapore for a period because the founders were seen training at a school with Marxist leanings, leading to local newspapers labelling them "Marxist workshops".



Additionally, TNS and the arts scene in general faced problems with the regulatory framework at the time as regulation was carried out by the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit (PELU), which was run by the police force rather than any arts-related institution. The 1999 play *sex.violence.blood.gore* received three cuts to its script as it was deemed to be racially and religiously inflammatory. TNS reacted by distributing the original script and performing the cut scenes in fast-forward.

Despite such incidents, Mr Tan noted that the relationship between TNS and the government was never irrecoverably damaged. In fact, the parties continued to work across their differences over the years, and the collaboration experienced progress. In 2006, the Ministry of Education selected *Off Centre* as a literature text for the 'O' and 'N' levels examinations; PELU was eventually replaced by the Media Development Authority (MDA), a regulatory body with a better understanding of the arts; and TNS continued its work in both the arts scene and activism, in events such as the Manifesto for the Arts, the censorship review, the



“Sticker Lady” campaign as well as various plays involving collaboration, cultural politics and LGBT issues.

Mr Tan concluded by arguing that the arts sometimes transcend pragmatism and economic motives, as their value is not always quantifiable. He stressed the need for further collaboration between the arts scene and the government, to celebrate diversity and make way for alternative and lateral modes. He used the metaphor of a compass and its different directions, explaining that a different direction does not necessarily mean one has to be diametrically opposed to the government. There are many other positions a civic group can take in its relationship with the government.

### **Ideals**

*Speaker: Associate Professor Kwok Kian Woon, Division of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University*

Assoc. Prof. Kwok gave a historical and philosophical dimension to the discussion on civil society. He began with two observations: First, that civil society is not only positioned in relation to the state, but also in relation to the “market” — thus, if the state can be repressive, the “market” too can be corrosive of human values. Second, that civil society has to be positioned relative to the emergence and flourishing of the nation, as the historical ideals of civil society predated the formal arrival of nations.

Here, Assoc. Prof. Kwok gave the example of Singapore’s proclamation as a nation, specifically with the concluding line “Singapore shall forever be a sovereign democratic and independent nation, founded upon the principles of liberty and justice and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of her people in a more just and equal society.” He noted that this line embodied certain universalistic values that spilled over into the Singapore Pledge — values such as democracy, justice and equality, although, he said tongue-in-cheek, he always wondered what happened to “liberty” as it is not written in the Pledge.



Such ideals, he argued, share similarities and differences to idealism. While they could be systematised into an “-ism” and programmes, they could also be desirable ends in themselves, which led to the question of whether the ends ultimately justify the means. He cited Mahatma Gandhi, who had said, “The means we employ are ends in the making.” Idealism does not mean blind or mechanical adherence to rules, and as such does not always exist in direct opposition to practicality.

From this, Assoc. Prof. Kwok drew out two different types of discourses that contemporary nation states make when organising collective life: first, communitarianism, where the collective takes precedence over the individual; and second, liberal individualism, where rights are also part of the collective landscape. Singapore’s idea of meritocracy has shown an affinity for the latter, which raises the question of what types of moral logic we appeal to.

These reflections led him to describe the changes that have now taken place on the mandatory death penalty law in Singapore, an area where the state could literally decide on the life and death of a person. These changes, he argued, did not happen automatically — without any action from civil society, the state and the “market” would not have taken actions that we think of as being “progressive”.

Assoc. Prof. Kwok also pointed out that there must be some tolerance for uncivil behaviour in civil society, as people would always have different conceptions of what the good life or the good society should be. Public reasoning in a democratic society must be based on more than just free and fair elections; how people vote also depends on their understanding of the problems that need to be addressed.

Concluding the session, he emphasised the need to keep “civil” in “civil society”; one must go beyond just the pursuit of self-interest and personal viewpoint. For this to succeed, he stressed the importance of having a discourse that goes beyond citizens and their claims, as well as the need for human reasoning and discretion.

## Discussion

Chairperson, Assoc. Prof. George began saying that Singapore has seen the flowering of civil society over the past decade, with many new organisations occupying a prominent space in the sector.



Assoc Prof Kwok (far right) answering a question as Ms Faizah (left), Assoc Prof George (second from left) and Mr Tan look on.

However, many new oppositional voices have emerged in the public sphere as well who believe that the only correct response to problems is to bring down the PAP-led state. As a result, collaborative groups are attacked by them. He wondered how much of a problem this is for groups such as the Nature Society and TNS.

In her response, Ms Faizah reiterated the importance of not seeing the issue as “us versus them”, and to think about matters more holistically. While using more empathetic and collaborative language is important, people also need to view issues through different paradigms and lenses so that they can develop a better understanding of the other stakeholders involved.

Mr Tan, meanwhile, explained that TNS is not only independent of the state, but also of people occupying the oppositional position; while engaging with the government could be seen as a “sell-out” by critics, the latter did not see the artist’s viewpoint. He noted that collaboration over time had in fact created allies within the government, inching civil society towards a tipping point of real change.

Assoc. Prof. Kwok noted that there is still however a sort of petitionary culture in Singaporean society, citing the example of neighbours calling the police over problems with each other, rather than settling issues face-to-face. He argued that everyday social interaction and its effect on civil society should be thought about in greater detail.

A member of the audience then asked where the panel saw room for contestation and debate in the paradigm, and whether non-partisan politics had a role to play. Ms Faizah believed that it is a matter of managing the relationship, ensuring that engagement remains civil and that evidence-based arguments are used rather than purely political arguments.

Another member of the audience wondered whether the government now recognises that civil society can fulfil the dual roles of collaborating with the government and reaching out to the public, where they were previously seen as dichotomous. Mr Tan affirmed this, favourably comparing the stance of the MDA to PELU, and giving the example of MDA officers defending a TNS play to those further up the decision-making chain. Working with agencies is certainly the preferable option, though contestation still serves a purpose.

A participant who is a human rights advocate questioned whether there are certain issues in society that may be compromised by doing that, citing the example of treating migrant workers with dignity. She asked how public reasoning could be done on such issues, given that the public is not necessarily supportive of the cause.

Ms Faizah replied that this is an issue of capacity-building and that civil society should continue to raise "non-mainstream" issues. This would then help to spread awareness among people who would otherwise not know or care about such issues. Mr Tan noted that certain issues would inherently have more layers that have to be addressed and thus experience slower progress. He argued that the way out of such difficulties and challenges is to increase the trust between partners and allow all parties — including those who have chosen to collaborate with the government — to speak.

Another participant asked how civil society that emphasised the freedom to practise religion should respond to the debate regarding the *hijab* (headscarf for Muslim women), on whether Muslim women should be allowed to wear it in the public uniformed services. Assoc. Prof. Kwok responded by raising the concept of discretion, which links to the jurisprudence idea of placing reasoning above precedent. He further argued that discretion is often closed off by the claim of "trade-offs", yet there could be room for further reasoning or thinking on this issue if one looks closer.

A participant from an animal welfare group noted that the government has progressed in that it has shown its willingness to agree to disagree, citing ACRES as an organisation that has gained the trust of government. ACRES now manages the Agri-Veterinary Authority (AVA) hotline after office hours, showing the extent of trust between the two parties, yet without ACRES feeling that it compromises its values in doing so. Another participant from a nature group agreed that with the view that collaboration on certain issues does not mean necessarily mean agreement with the government on all of its decisions and policies.

Rounding off the session, Assoc. Prof. George asked the speakers if they felt it would be preferable to have a full-time lawyer (to fight in the courts) or a full-time former civil servant (to foster greater connections and relationships with policymakers), if one had a fixed budget in building the capacity of a civil society organisation. Ms Faizah replied that a good relationship is always preferable, and that lawsuits against anyone should be the last resort as they extract a heavy price on the relationship.

**SESSION THREE: AGENDA (PARALLEL SESSIONS)****The Future of the "Many Helping Hands" Approach to Sustainable Social Impact**

*Chairperson: Ms Yew Lun Tian, Political Correspondent, Lianhe Zaobao (联合早报), Singapore Press Holdings Limited*

*Speakers: Ms Ang Bee Lian, Director of Social Welfare, Ministry of Social and Family Development; Ms Corinna Lim, Executive Director, Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE)*

This session focused on gathering views about the future of Singapore's "many helping hands" approach to delivering social services.

The first speaker, Ms Ang Bee Lian of the Ministry of Social and Family Development, said that tension is inherent in the relationship among non-government organisations (NGOs), voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) and other civil society organisations (CSOs) as they are constantly competing for manpower as well as funds from government institutions and private organisations. Using the analogy of the hand to describe the social service sector, Ms Ang said that the social organisations are like fingers that touch the ground, the government like the palm of the hand which provides overall co-ordination and manages movements, and the funding, like the muscles. However, Ms Ang lamented, that the system does not always work as smoothly as depicted in the analogy.



Ms Yew (centre) introducing the speakers, Ms Ang (left) and Ms Lim (right).

Often, there are overlaps or constraints at the different levels due to the lack of appropriate intermediaries to orchestrate the programmes of different organisations. There are also growing demands on the sector and there is a shortage of professionals on the ground. As a result, the service received by beneficiaries can be short of what is required.

Ms Ang explained that her preference is for simple programmes that are easily accessible by those who need help. In this respect, the issue of design is an important one. She stressed that it is important that programmes are carefully tailored to fit the specific needs of those seeking help. Ultimately, social workers should be able to walk beneficiaries and their families right through the journey to restoration and stability.

Ms Ang also highlighted the need for business corporations to be involved in the community and to support programmes through sponsorships. However, it would be difficult for the corporations to interface effectively with other social organisations because of the lack of capable intermediaries to match and manage the partnership.

Ms Ang also highlighted the need for business corporations to be involved in the community and to support programmes through sponsorships. However, it would be difficult for the corporations to interface effectively with other social organisations because of the lack of capable intermediaries to match and manage the partnership.

The second speaker, Ms Corinna Lim of AWARE, presented statistics on philanthropy and volunteerism. While their rates have gone up in Singapore over time, these still rank lowly

against other countries. She conjectured that the low participation in civic spheres could be attributed to laws requiring groups to register as societies or charities, which might seem too troublesome. She also alluded to the Internal Security Act and lack of funding as further impediments to ground-up initiatives.

Ms Lim shared the history of AWARE and described its most recent, large-scale endeavour, the "End All Violence Against Women" campaign in 2012. The purpose of the campaign was to educate the public on the need to intervene in a situation of violence against women, especially since earlier surveys had shown that people would usually not do so. AWARE did not just intend to educate the public. Calling their approach "Hands +", it set out to nurture 1,000 "individual change makers" who would in turn commit to raising the awareness of five other people so that they too could adopt a stance of zero tolerance to violence against women. This was, according to Ms Lim, one of the ways in which a community of concerned citizens can be formed to address a public and social need, as an extension of the "many helping hands" approach.

## Discussion

A participant asked if ground-up work has become too institutionalised today, which create unnecessary barriers to potential self-help initiatives. It was easier in the past when help groups were community-based. Ms Ang replied that although she does agree that it seemed better in the past, this was for a different reason. She explained that ground-up movements of the past took advantage of the 50-50 system, where the state provided 50 per cent of the funding and the social organisation raised the rest of the amount. This way, the organisations would have greater autonomy. VWOs, NGOs and other CSOs should always look to collaborate because if they depend on the state for funding, they would feel as if they are merely performing a contract job.

A member of the audience lamented that the public has the impression that VWOs are volunteer-run when in fact they require paid staff. When it comes to funding and donations, the donors and funders often want the money to be spent directly on the beneficiaries. The problem with such a view is that it leaves little support for the management side of the house and the professionals who should be compensated properly. This made it difficult to attract and retain manpower.

Ms Ang said that there is indeed that other layer that sets policy and can be a constraint on how staff are compensated — the board members. She also added that people do feel for the VWOs and respect the work that the individuals do. She added that there are some social organisations that do pay their staff salaries that commensurate with their skills and work. There is therefore a real need to tap into the corporate sector to support the organisations in that way too.

A participant said that while she remains sceptical of corporations funding ground-up initiatives, there are exceptions, and it is critical to ensure a good matching between them and the social organisations. Ms Lim responded that while corporations would not usually mind engaging with something "safe" like animal rights or environmental preservation, they shy away from sensitive topics like women's rights. This needs to change.

## The Future of Civic Education for Thriving, Deliberative Democracy

*Chairperson: Ms Dawn Yip, Director and Principal Consultant, Soulbreath Consulting*

*Speaker: Associate Professor Kenneth Paul Tan, Vice Dean (Academic Affairs), Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy*

This session discussed what more could be done to further develop citizens' consciousness of the country's social and political conditions and needs, as well as develop their capacity to be full, active, informed members of a democracy.

The speaker, Associate Professor Kenneth Paul Tan, began by saying that apart from the voting in a general election, democracy also takes place between elections in the form of deliberation in the public sphere. This is the exercise of "deliberative democracy". Civic education should develop character traits in citizens that support deliberative democracy.

Assoc. Prof. Tan said that deliberative democracy works well when certain conditions are in place. These include having a safe space to speak without fear; a process of exchange that is inclusive and representative, and allows for fair treatment of views; easy access to the public sphere through platforms and structures like social media; and an understanding that people in the engagement feel obliged to make only claims that are reasonable, verifiable by logic, and truthful.

Also, deliberative democracy is at its best when it is developmental rather than aggregative in its approach, which means that participants work together in good faith, respect each other's moral positions to shape commonality, and collectively improve on the framework of public reason. This developmental perspective provides participants with the freedom to deviate from their original positions as a result of the deliberative process. In contrast, an aggregative approach sees individuals advertise their wants and desires in the public sphere, which are then added to the overall outcome if possible.



Given that, what are the attributes that citizens require for a functioning deliberative democracy? Citizens need to be able to speak courageously, and be tolerant and open-minded about the viewpoints of other participants. This is possible if the exchange is based on mutual respect and generalised trust. They should also possess the relevant knowledge as well as the capacity to understand the arguments and issues, and have logical, interpretive and critical thinking skills. Participants need to be able to express themselves effectively and communicate convincingly. Added to this is the creativity to imagine what it is like for others and reframe the terms of disagreement when conversations arrive at a seeming impasse. Overall, citizens need to have 'democratic character', which refers to habits, dispositions usually acquired through some process of inculcation.

The question then is if civic education can shape such attributes and promote "democratic character". Although local civic education in the formal school setting has been increasing in depth and sophistication in recent years, particular aspects of curriculum and pedagogy require special attention to achieve learning outcomes that effectively develop deliberative democracy.

The content of curriculum should impart knowledge directly relevant for citizenship. These aid the ability to understand and possibly find resolution to dilemmas and controversy in the public sphere. Exposure to subjects like Political Science and Sociology helps to achieve this.

On the aspect of pedagogy, or the method through which such attributes can be taught, Assoc. Prof. Tan felt that classroom teaching needs to move from its rules-based orientation and be "democratised". This can be aided with the creative use of technology and methods of active learning such as forum theatre, problem-based learning as well as peer-learning. The process of civic education can inculcate soft skills like leadership as well as an attitude of lifelong learning, and encourage students to listen both sensitively and critically to arguments that are being presented.

Democratic participation should be an exercise in learning by doing, rather than waiting for the ideal moment to arrive. In the classroom context, students should not wait till they graduate to be active in grassroots, civil or political pursuits.

Some potential issues that could arise with this approach to civic education include: whether public debate would only represent the views of elite citizens; the need to be cognisant of and selective in contradictory impulses in differing philosophical traditions of civic education (like civic republicanism and liberal democracy); how much participation is to be expected and how non-participation should be treated; as well as whether educators are prepared and have sufficient capacity to play their part.

## **Discussion**

The discussion touched on the sphere, scope, content and teaching of civic education, and its role in education as a whole.

Participants said that while it was good to look at civic education in schools, should it not instead begin at home where parents play an important role in inculcating values? To this end, it would perhaps be fruitful to channel resources to help parents with civic education in the familial context.

One participant suggested that civic education is often not a priority even in school especially as is a non-examinable subject. Another said that the thrust of education should itself aim at inculcating the lifelong love for learning and knowledge, and not simply be a pursuit of good academic results and skills development for a job. Another participant raised the potential for engaging non-state actors in the delivery of civic education in schools, which has been taking place in the legal sector.

The session also included a discussion on the education level at which civic education would be appropriate. Upon the invitation of the chairperson, the audience voted on the question of how they would distribute available resources for the delivery of civic education across

education levels. Approximately half the participants would place their resources at the pre-school or primary level, about another half at the secondary level, none at the post-secondary level, and a few for equal amounts across all levels.

There was also debate about the conditions necessary for a thriving deliberative democracy to develop. One participant did not view the necessity of a safe space to speak as a prerequisite as this would remove some of the challenges that were a natural part of deliberative democracy. To this Assoc. Prof. Tan said there is an impulse on the part of Singaporeans to self-censor, and not even want to enter the public space.

Another participant pointed to the state of information asymmetry, in which the public often does not have access to sufficient information to facilitate public debate.

### **The Future of Youth Activism in Singapore**

*Chairperson: Ms Bernise Ang, Co-Founder, Syinc*

*Speaker: Mr Tong Yee, Co-Founder and Director, The Thought Collective*

This session discussed what drives youth activism currently and how to promote it among Singaporeans.

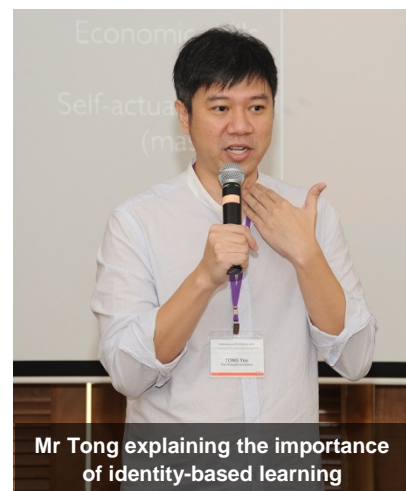
Mr Tong began by highlighting three characteristics of youth activism in Singapore today:

*Activism is “entertainment”.* Mr Tong noted that youths generally join causes today because they find them inspiring and exciting. To keep them critically engaged, it is important to note that broad narratives around causes hold appeal. He explained that in applying the idea of “entertainment” to youth activism, he was merely trying to emphasise the enjoyment that youth activists sought in the work, and that it did not mean that they treat the work or the issues frivolously.

*Confusion from a conflict of goals and values.* Debilitating confusion arises when various civic goals clash. Mr Tong shared how students were exposed to different sides of the issue concerning Bukit Brown cemetery — from both the conservationists’ and the Land Transport Authority’s points of view — and found themselves passionately connected to the issue, but torn between the viewpoints as both seemed reasonable. When youths are confronted by perceived contradictions in goals, they pull back, resulting in a façade of apathy.

*Youths need mentors.* Many youth activists are mentored by people who believe in a cause; such mentors not only foster the growth of knowledge but also of mindsets. Mr Tong stressed the importance of focusing on the mindset and personal growth when mobilising youths.

Since the 1950s, the education system in Singapore has emphasised skills-based learning, teaching basic survival skills and economic skills. However, an informal straw poll of the audience showed an almost unanimous vote for the development of identity and the values



**Mr Tong explaining the importance of identity-based learning**



of a person over that of skills when developing youth activism. The fast-changing work and economy can render skills obsolete, but a system of identity-based learning — focused on moral identity, social identity and national identity — provides meaning and passion for youths, along with the energy to tackle any sort of issues, including bread and butter issues, head on. Their activism must stem from who they are and they need to take responsibility for matters beyond their individual persons or family.

## Discussion

When asked about how best to develop the qualities that youth activists require, Mr Tong shared a personal experience: he had undertaken a research project in 2009 to help a student better understand the conservation of green spaces in Singapore. As a result of this initial interest, he took up a three-year course about nature in Singapore. This process forced him to take responsibility for his own learning, and eventually cultivated a better understanding and awareness of his own attitudes and prejudices.

Mr Tong was asked if the Singapore education system that espouses meritocracy is compatible with a values-based orientation. Mr Tong explained that meritocracy is a value choice, and raised the example of the current Education Minister calling all schools "good", with which he identified. Educational systems can create two very different outcomes: stratify or equalise opportunities. While the two may appear contradictory, it may be possible for them to co-exist; and continually holding the paradox together would allow for a change in the culture of thinking that currently permeates education and turn the traditional narrative of "trade-offs" into that of value choices.

Following this answer, a participant asked if the economic reality would supersede being a "good person" in Singapore even if education and family provides them the necessary tools to do so. Mr Tong agreed that currently, people are absolutely conscious of their economic realities, which is a substantial barrier to activism as all experiences are coloured by that lens. Here, he raised the point that activism may focus too much on the cause and not enough on the advocate — a common criticism of the Community Involvement Programme (CIP) for local students. Instead, the focus should be on whether advocates experience personal growth and change as people, again linking back to the issue of values and identity.

Many civic organisations are excellent platforms through which one imbibes values. Although civil society has not traditionally been a part of schools and the education system, he expressed hope that greater synergy could be found between them.

Rounding out the session, a participant then asked if activists could teach passion and devotion to students. Mr Tong replied that such passion was stumbled upon rather than taught; and, systemising such serendipity would be extremely difficult. However, the system could aim to give students more exposure and thus, increase the opportunity for advocacy and activism.

## The Future Legislative Landscape Relating to Civil Society in Singapore

*Chairperson: Mr Nicholas Fang, Executive Director, Singapore Institute of International Affairs and Nominated Member of Parliament*

*Speaker: Dr Kevin Tan, Immediate Past President, Singapore Heritage Society*

This session discussed the laws that guide the operation of civil society in Singapore and what could or should change in order to facilitate future development of the sector.

Speaker Dr Kevin Tan, Immediate Past President of the Singapore Heritage Society, began the session by discussing the key provisions relating to civil society in Singapore found in Article 14(1) of the Constitution, which lays out the rights of Singapore citizens to the freedom of speech, assembly, and to form associations. However, similar to clauses in other laws and declarations such as the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration of Human Rights, restrictions are placed on these rights in Article 14(2) — they are “derogable rights”, which means they can be limited or suspended in some way. The salient issue therefore is not the law itself, but rather the *implementation* of its provisions.

Dr Tan cited as an example the evolution of the implementation of Article 14(1C) — the right to form associations. Previously, it was not unheard of to wait a year for the result of an application to register a society. However, the Societies Act was amended in 2004 to place the burden of proof on the Registrar of Societies to explain why applications are rejected, reflecting that it is a citizen’s *right* to form associations. This act was further amended in 2007 to make a distinction between groups listed in a Schedule of Societies that require the Registrar’s approval and those that enjoy automatic approval. The Schedule encompasses groups representing “any religion, ethnic group, clan, nationality or class of persons defined by reference to their gender or sexual orientation”, political associations, and associations established under foreign instruction, among others. (See appended Schedule.)



After a society is approved, the Registrar is also still able to change the constitution of a society, and to place restrictions on it, for example, in receiving foreign funding, whether it can hold open forums or carry out open recruitment for members.

Dr Tan then gave his “wishlist” of the legislative changes. This included adding more safeguards to the Internal Security Act and having the law play a greater role in this reform as opposed to the Executive; reviewing the Sedition Act, which currently allows the Executive a large degree of discretion in implementation, and perhaps dealing with some of its provisions under ordinary criminal law instead; making the definition of defamation under the Defamation Act less ambiguous and introducing qualified privilege in reporting on public personalities; and refining the rules for the organisation and staging of meetings and “public entertainment”.

Dr Tan concluded by emphasising that simply changing laws may not necessarily bring about a more vibrant civil society. Instead, its vibrancy will depend on the perceptions of the government and its attitude towards civil society.

## Discussion

A participant argued that there is foreign funding filtering through to some organisations in Singapore like religious or religiously-inspired groups that stand for narrow causes and intolerance. Unfortunately, groups that would typically challenge these find themselves hobbled by the proscription against foreign funding (presumably through the Political Donations Act) and so do not have the equivalent resources to mount an equal fight. The question then is whether the proscription should be even more widely applied or removed altogether. Dr Tan suggested that it would be better for the authorities to work harder to ensure that flows into the country to fund intolerant groups be stopped although he recognised that it would be challenging to find all instances of this.

A participant felt that the restrictions imposed on the organising and staging of meetings represented a "day-to-day stumbling block" for organisations. For example, groups that want to invite foreign experts in Singapore to speak at events would need to first get a permit.<sup>2</sup>

Participants felt that the broad nature of the Sedition Act gives the Executive too much discretion in its application and that could curb discussions that would otherwise be beneficial even on sensitive topics of race and religion. In response, it was clarified that there is a clause in the Act stating that opinions offered to improve government are not seditious, but admittedly, this clause is not well known and people are still fearful of being charged under the Act (see Appendix).

A participant suggested that social media could act as a safety valve, allowing citizens to vent their frustrations in-between elections. Another participant agreed, but this argued that this is not a conscious political strategy of the government. It is simply so because the government cannot regulate the Internet so thoroughly.

There is also a difference between participating in online discussions and in joining a civil society group. While citizens are now more engaged online on a select group of issues, this engagement is usually not sustained. The anonymity of the Internet also sometimes results in ranting and extremist comments, as opposed to a concerted constructive effort to effect change.

A participant argued that democracies have an interest in fostering civil society as it can act as a check against rogue governments. A strong civil society could act as an additional "key", protecting what Singapore has built. Unfortunately, people performing this role are often viewed as troublemakers because they disagree with the government. However, the business of government can be messy and the voters who have elected their leaders need not agree with those leaders all the time. Also, there will always be those who are radical. What is important is for government leaders to work with those in the middle, even those

---

2. The Public Order Act requires a police permit for a wide range of gatherings (please see Appendix). If foreign speakers were invited, applicants would need to seek approval from the Ministry of Manpower first, and submit this approval in their application for a police permit.

who have dissenting views, and the positive situation today is that there are some in government who are more open to different views.

### **The Future of Ethnic-Based Civil Society in Singapore**

*Chairperson: Mr Amrin Amin, Committee Member, Suara Musyawarah*

*Speaker: Dr Sharon Siddique, Director, Sreekumar, Siddique & Co Pte Ltd and Visiting Professorial Fellow, Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, National University of Singapore*

This session focused on the future of ethnic-based civil society, which primarily refers to the role of self-help groups as well as clan and immigrant associations in Singapore.

Speaker Dr Sharon Siddique of Sreekumar, Siddique & Co Pte Ltd began her presentation by quoting Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong: "Should we have more cosmopolitan values in society? Because that is what we are now, more cosmopolitan. Or do we revert to just merely Singaporean, meaning Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian?"

Dr Siddique noted that the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) rubric is the dominant paradigm of multiculturalism in Singapore society and is closely intertwined with concepts like multilingualism and meritocracy. Many government policies and political institutions are based on this CMIO model too, like the ethnic quotas in public housing estates, the mother tongue policy of bilingualism as well as the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system. In the same way, ethnic-based civil society mirrors the CMIO model — the first-tier self-help groups Mendaki, SINDA, CDAC and the Eurasian Association are formed on that basis. They provide many areas of social support from education to skills-upgrading.



Dr Siddique during the audience discussion

The future of ethnic-based civil society, according to Dr Siddique, would depend on how the CMIO model itself evolves as society grows more complex. With increasing immigration, there will be groups of people who feel they do not fit into the CMIO categories. Similarly, ethnic-based civil society groups have to become more diverse to reflect the complex needs of society. Using the examples of the revival of clan associations and cultural literary groups, the speaker indicated that these groups would be "particularised" and not conform to the CMIO paradigm. New types of non-ethnic-based, issue- or interest-oriented groups will also proliferate and become prominent. However, self-help groups will remain relevant as long as the key policies are framed by the CMIO paradigm, and as such, society as well as state policy is still organised around these ethnic categories.

In conclusion, Dr Siddique suggested that Singaporean society might not be able to hew so closely to the CMIO model in the future as the country has chosen the path of greater cosmopolitanism. The CMIO model cannot contain Singapore's global aspirations nor was it designed to.

## Discussion

To invite audience participation, Chairperson Amrin Amin posed several questions: Did they agree with Dr Siddique's views? What role would ethnic-based self-help groups play in the future? What is the one important change facing ethnic-based civil society?

There was a general consensus among participants that the composition of Singapore society is becoming increasingly diverse and complex, given the factors of immigration and rate of intermarriage. Yet, the issues of race and ethnicity would not disappear from our collective consciousness and Singapore would not become a non-ethnic society.

The increasingly complex ethnic make-up of Singapore society does not mean that ethnic-based self-help groups would cease to be relevant, said several participants. In fact, there is enough space in civil society to accommodate both ethnic-based and interest-based groups. After all, any individual can be concerned about a range of issues at the same time. Ethnic cultures will persist and provide strong meanings of identity and expression even if some people prefer "the intercultural" while others want to "preserve their own ways".

One trend that can promote the development of ethnic-based civil society is immigration. To illustrate, newly-arrived immigrants from China join and are reviving the clan associations, which had earlier struggled with low membership. While the immigrants bring fresh input and resources to the associations, they also run the risk of becoming exclusive. In the same manner, new ethnic-based civil society patterns — formed on the diverse ethnicities of other immigrants — might emerge. Another participant added that ethnic-based self-help groups do serve a function in heritage and cultural conservation.

There is also still a real social and cultural need for ethnic-based civic institutions. Just like how the vernacular newspapers and clan associations are the "preserve" of the less educated, the low-income and those who cannot speak the English language — ethnic-based self-help groups are "necessary and important" to these individuals to have access to resources and community help to address their social needs.

Nevertheless, there were participants who were apprehensive of the negative consequences of providing assistance along ethnic lines. One participant wondered if Singapore's increased diversity would lead to a proliferation of different ethnic-based self-help groups competing for resources, thereby eroding social cohesion. This was echoed by another participant: "The more ethnic-based civil society groups we have, we tend to divide society than unite society."

Another participant opined that ethnic-based self-help groups could come across as "exclusionist": "What's stopping a non-Malay from being interested in Malay issues and vice versa?" She felt that when ethnic-based issues become interest-based issues, there could be lateral interaction and volunteerism, which would be healthier.

At the macro-level, it is clear however that CMIO multiculturalism and ethnic-based civil society are tied to the state and its policies. As one participant stated, the CMIO framework is "a model of governance which privileges some discussion of ethnic issues but only from a certain angle... and the state sets the constraints." In her opinion, the state should "move back from their support of ethnic-based self-help groups." In the future, one thing is clear — there will be more questioning of the current ethnic-based institutions and policies.

## SESSION FOUR: CRAFTING OUR FUTURE

*Chairperson: Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies*

In Session Four, the chairpersons of each of the previous five parallel sessions gave brief presentations of the issues that were raised to generate further discussion.



(L-R): Chairpersons Ms Yew Lun Tian, Ms Dawn Yip, Ms Bernise Ang, Mr Nicholas Fang, Mr Amrin Amin

### The Future of the "Many Helping Hands" Approach to Sustainable Social Impact

On the future of the helping hands approach, Chairperson Ms Yew Lun Tian of *Lianhe Zaobao* said that one of the speakers at her session Ms Ang Bee Lian felt that tension among all the different parts of the sector was only to be expected but could be healthy. Each had its part to play. Using the analogy of a "hand", Ms Ang said that groups that worked directly with the public are like the fingers, the government that played the co-ordinating role like the palm, and funding like the muscles. Certainly, more effort is needed to synergise the work of the different parts. From the perspective of civic organisations, Ms Corinna Lim of AWARE spoke on the organisation's "Hands +" approach, where it takes on an advocacy role in addition to the services it delivers. Ms Lim said that there were some hurdles that need to be addressed for a more vibrant sector to emerge such as the requirement of formal registration for groups of people who wish to do good, laws on restricting political activities and lack of funding. On funding, partnerships with private corporations and the social enterprise models could be developed to generate resources. Participants in the session named first, the need to invest in leadership and people development, and second, the need to allow for conducting community engagement from the ground up as ways to improve the "many helping hands" approach.

### The Future of Civic Education for Thriving Deliberative Democracy

Chairperson Ms Dawn Yip from Soulbreath Consulting shared that the speaker for the session, Assoc. Prof. Kenneth Paul Tan talked about the necessary conditions that would be conducive for a deliberative democracy, and within that said that the supporting attributes that citizens must have are courage, confidence, tolerance, open-mindedness, empathy, respect, trust, knowledge, understanding, logical and interpretive skills, critical thinking, communication skills and creativity. The role of civic education is to encourage the development of those attributes. From the pedagogical standpoint, methods of active learning, learning by doing as well as the use of technology could be very effective in inculcating norms consistent with deliberative democracy. Participants felt that civic education should be targeted at children in the pre-school to secondary school level. There is also a role for parents too. In general, education has to be thought of as helping people learn to ask better questions or *xue wen* (学问 in Chinese), rather than learn a skill or profession, or *xue ye* (学业). Deliberative democracy would benefit from a developmental

rather than aggregative approach, where participants bring different points of view together and collectively arrive at a different perspective, rather than simply make their claims and wants known, and wait for them to be aggregated in the public sphere.

### **The Future of Youth Activism in Singapore**

Chairperson Ms Bernise Ang of Syinc summarised speaker Mr Tong Yee's points about youth activism. Mr Tong emphasised the need to make activism appealing to the young and also help them manage the tensions in values and competing social interests. Of the various kinds of objectives that one could have in education and activism — basic survival, economic, self actualisation — most emphasis had been placed on economic skills in the local schooling context. The session focused on the need to provide greater guidance yet also greater intellectual freedom in order to make youth activism more vibrant. The approach cannot be too prescriptive especially in an age where technology facilitates easy access to information. Youths do need to be equipped with better sense-making skills in the information-saturated world of today, to thrive as well as pursue their passions and causes.

### **The Future Legislative Landscape Relating to Civil Society in Singapore**

Chairperson Mr Nicholas Fang of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs shared that speaker Dr Kevin Tan argued that civil society flourished when the state was weak. The strong influence of the state in Singapore created a lack of space for civil society to some extent. The political freedoms accorded to citizens were enshrined in the legislation, but accompanied with caveats. Dr Tan's "wish list" of key laws that may require amendment include the Internal Security Act and the Sedition Act. The discussion touched on discrepancies of the rules on limits to foreign funding between "political associations" and other kinds of organisations; the curtailing of views on social media platforms; and even the desire for greater state influence in the provision of public goods. Dr Tan's take was that it was unlikely there would be significant change to laws governing civil society leading to the 2016 general election. In addition, the burden of change should not be placed on the legislative framework but on the changing perspectives and attitudes of those from civil society and government about engaging each other.

### **The Future of Ethnic-Based Civil Society in Singapore**

Chairperson Mr Amrin Amin of Suara Musyawarah fleshed out the thrust of the parallel session on the future of ethnic-based civil society. Speaker Dr Sharon Siddique shared that certain key government policies (housing and language education) were based on the CMIO framework. The ethnic-based civil society (self-help groups and societies) mirrored the CMIO framework and would remain relevant as long as the latter was in place. In the discussion, key points raised include how an ethnic-based society will continue to be relevant, but at the same time it was likely that Singapore will see the growth of more interest groups that cut across ethnic-groups. There was the question of whether it would be good for groups to organise across ethnic lines, considering demographic changes that have taken place since the framework was first implemented. There was also the issue of whether there would be a split in racial loyalties in inter-ethnic marriages, as well as whether new immigrants would energise the base of ethnic clan associations. There would be the issue of whether these groups would be exclusivist and their impact on the broader society. Going forward, Singapore may see ethnic-based society operating behind the scenes, as seen in how the

recent *hijab* debate was brought to the fore by internet groups, and where civil society in the manner of formal groups were then forced to respond to this.

## Discussion

A participant raised the question of what would shape and sharpen civil society in Singapore — is it when there is an economic downturn or is it dependent on a specific relationship with the government, or would civil society flourish as other spheres in Singapore did? One participant said that civil society as social movements tended to exist regardless of circumstances in other parts of the world, and is likely here to stay. Another said that civil society from Tocqueville's perspective does not depend on whether conditions are good or bad in the country, and should be encouraged for the building of social capital and trust. Mr Fang said that in his session, what was discussed was not so much about the conditions that would help civil society to flourish but rather developments like the chilling effect of the ISA that would hinder its growth. Another participant said that it was not so much a change in the law that could cause civil society to flourish, but that the government itself needed to learn to respond appropriately when difficult points are raised from the ground-up.

One participant said that the type of civil society discussed in this conference did not seem to touch on the oppositional nature of contestation in this space in pushing for and testing out issues, which often placed groups in a de facto, if not de jure position against the state in other parts of the world. How did Singapore civil society function in the midst of developments in the region like Bersih in Malaysia, recent protests in Indonesia, as well as the Arab Spring? Mr Amrin said that Singapore's civil society already had that messiness, and could expect to see more of that, like with the recent *hijab* debate. Civil society in Singapore has to respond to these issues and earn their stripes and following. Ms Yip said that Bersih or the Arab Spring could happen in Singapore if citizens feel their needs are not met, and that this could potentially catalyse extreme action.

The session's chairperson Dr Koh compared the proceedings of this conference with the one held 15 years ago. Back then, it was difficult to register societies, Speaker's Corner did not yet exist and there was a huge deficit in the relationship between the state and civil society. Today, this deficit appears to have narrowed significantly even if it still exists. In addition, political leaders have been attempting to respond to difficult issues and questions of the day, which perhaps accounts of the lack of widespread protests mounted by civil society of the nature that was referred to earlier. To this, a participant suggested that it may be worthwhile to look into how policymakers can better communicate with people, even with difficult policies. Another participant asked the question of where civil society in Singapore really was, given that it was the same individuals that continued to be engaged in discussions.

Other points raised included the struggle of early adopters in new spheres of civil society, the place of political parties in the civil society rubric, as well as the suggestion that the Institute could have a closed-door session on the future of the CMIO framework.



## SESSION FIVE: DIALOGUE SESSION WITH MINISTER FOR LAW AND MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, MR K SHANMUGAM

*Chairperson: Professor Tommy Koh, Special Adviser, Institute of Policy Studies*

*Q: Two dominant themes emerged from the theme from the first panel: there will be increasingly diverse voices; and different groups must agree to disagree. What role do you think the government should play or not play in helping citizens acquire this skill? In the online space, do you foresee law taking a back seat to allow voices of self-restraint to materialise?*

Min Shanmugam said that his view of the government's role in such situations should be minimalist — the government could sometimes be a catalyst for change and intervene to prevent conduct that is harmful to others, but should let people have the maximum ability to do what they want. Countries would then have to modify this role according to their individual needs (such as size, location and history), adding on responsibilities and roles as necessary to move society forward, both economically and socially.

Min Shanmugam further elaborated that the government should intervene in such matters only when they touched upon issues that may damage the fabric of society; using race and religion as examples, he explained that not everyone would be able to debate above a visceral level and understand their impact on the perception of others. In such contexts, the government should define the terms of debate, which has been the Singaporean government's position and will likely remain so well into the future despite the advent of the Internet.

Moving forward, Min Shanmugam believed that value-based education would become more important, with people moving beyond the pursuit of material benefits in the context of social changes here. He noted that Singapore was currently at a demographic "sweet spot" in terms of the dependency



ratio, and that the ratio would decrease drastically (from 6 to 2) in the relatively short time of 15 years; he argued that this issue was of fundamental importance given its implications for economic vibrancy, healthcare and housing, rather than the more "sexy" issues covered in the Conference.

Going back to the first question, Min Shanmugam explained that the government's role would be to identify challenges and have a frank discussion about the most important policy issues of the day, helping the younger generation to understand and face the issues as they would be the ones inheriting the situation. He reiterated the importance of value-based education in getting people to help one another.

On the second question, he stated that the government would not intervene unless criminal activity was present, and it would rather provide a framework; people would still be able to

go to court if they felt their rights have been infringed. Nonetheless, Min Shanmugam also noted that people could seek non-legal solutions to their problems, such as issuing corrections instead of bringing others to court for harassment or defamation. He also explained that the Ministry of Law is looking at updating laws concerning online harassment, as Singapore was "behind the curve" compared to countries such as Australia and New Zealand in these areas.

*Q: Many civil society groups are, by definition, narrow interest groups and it is not in their interest to deal with overarching concerns. Activists have spoken largely positively about collaboration with the government and developing a relationship; however, while the relationship should be equal, they do not seem to sense a similar commitment on the government's part to collaborate. What more can be done to institutionalise collaboration and consult in a more meaningful way? What can be done to remove the barriers that civil societies face?*

Min Shanmugam asserted that the claim of government being unwilling to consult was untrue. He stated his belief that the crux of the matter lay in whether the movement towards consultation was fast enough, as there would be parts of government exhibiting greater resistance toward consultation than others. Furthermore, associations and political activities cause the conflation of rhetoric with reality, making it more difficult to ascertain the differences between the two.

On the subject of rhetoric, Min Shanmugam argued that the Singapore government is actually highly welfarist in its policies even though it does not use such a term, distributing a document that showed various government subsidies to different income groups in areas such as education, housing and public assistance. Housing in particular was used as an example, with land being drawn from the reserves and a direct cash subsidy being provided to the buyer.

Next, Min Shanmugam highlighted poverty as an area where the government has harnessed the energy of NGOs and VWOs, as the government recognises that people can sometimes do a better job in providing the support that is needed. Nonetheless, he noted that civil society could not always be correct, and due to the wide scope of the government, civil society would naturally have varying experiences in their dealings with government. Min Shanmugam agreed that the approach at the ministerial level should be focused on improving the experience, especially in communicating why the government might be unwilling to work with civil society in certain cases. However, the preference would always be co-operation so that the government could tap into the enthusiasm of people.

*Q: Many VWOs have different visions, missions and interests in what they want to provide. This may lead to certain needs not matching what VWOs do, and could cause a clamouring for the government to provide certain services. Could the government do anything to better match needs with those willing to help?*

Min Shanmugam said that the government must try and meet such needs, and Members of Parliament need to be close to the ground to create a strong grassroots structure so as to get a good sense of what is needed. He also noted that there were many passionate people in civil society, and the government needed to increasingly work with people who may not always see eye to eye with it.

*Q: In order to have citizens who are better engaged on big issues, how might we improve civic education in Singapore, not only in schools but also in the family?*

Regarding societal values, Min Shanmugam addressed criticism directed at the government's perceived over-emphasis on economic values, arguing that this emphasis is important for the basic needs and dignity of each person. However, he agreed that there is a need to move beyond that now and look at ourselves as a community and what more we can do. Through this, there would be a substantial improvement in values-based education, allowing it to spread across society to parents. Min Shanmugam also highlighted the idealism and fervour that young people have displayed in promoting causes as an encouraging sign of development in the right direction.

*Q: Given that many have engaged with officials and there are still pockets of difficulties, what is the government doing to sensitise our civil servants to shift to the paradigm whereby such engagement between the government and civil society would be positive than negative?*

As someone concerned about animal welfare issues, Min Shanmugam highlighted the example of how substantive changes had been accomplished in the last two years, and how the government still works with groups and societies with a list of substantial complaints despite opposition from some Singaporeans who believe that animal welfare concerns may infringe on their personal safety. Ministries do incorporate external viewpoints in their analysis, with the recent changes to the mandatory death penalty as another example of that. Consultation with the relevant experts would remain the operating philosophy, with feedback being taken seriously.

*Q: Civic activism is happening in more distributed ways, and with more organisations and individual responsibility involved. How do you see our laws and socio-political climate changing as more citizens self-organise?*

Using poverty as an example, Min Shanmugam said that the government has done a lot to try and alleviate it by working closely with civil society. He welcomed informal groups and individual activism, saying that society would certainly be better-off with more people coming together. Such efforts would encourage good governance, and it is laudable to have a strong middle class with a civic consciousness, strong associational life, and strong institutions.

*Q: Do you see a change in the government's leadership role in ethnic self-help groups? Should government officials continue to lead these groups?*

Min Shanmugam argued that as long as ethnic self-help groups remained taxpayer-funded, the government must be there to ensure that the money is properly used. He pointed out that if it is defined as the government's role to help people, ethnic associations should have officials involved. Moreover, respective leaders of the self-help groups also happen to be community leaders, bringing about synergy and allowing them to push for changes in policies when needed. As such, this is not a philosophical question but a practical one of how one would get the best out of an organisation.

*Q: How are decisions about trade-offs made? Is it possible for the government to have a Freedom of Information Act to better understand the trade-offs in policies?*

Min Shanmugam responded that the government discusses trade-offs both publicly and in Parliament; reasons are set out and Members of Parliament are allowed to ask questions. While the full details may not be available, the government does make relevant details known to the general public.

*Q: Why was Maruah gazetted [as a political association], as it has raised very practical limitations relating to raising of funds for its activities?*

Min Shanmugam explained that as a political association, Maruah had indicated that it would be directly involved in politics. He noted that gazetting Maruah as a political organisation had little restriction on its activities beyond donations from foreign sources; and that the reasons for such restrictions should be obvious.

*Q: The Societies Act requires groups of 10 people or more to register as a society, would that not curtail informal volunteering?*

Min Shanmugam replied that informal volunteering would not be discouraged, so long as the cause was for the greater good of Singapore. A group of volunteers seeking to work together to distribute masks when the haze is upon Singapore could most certainly carry on.

\*\*\*\*\*

*The following IPS Research Assistants served as rapporteurs for the Parallel Sessions and wrote the reports for their respective sessions: Mohd Khamsya Bin Khidzer (The Future of the “Many Helping Hands” Approach to Sustainable Social Impact); Debbie Soon (The Future of Civic Education for Thriving, Deliberative Democracy); Tay Ek Kiat (The Future of Youth Activism in Singapore); Valerie Koh (The Future Legislative Landscape Relating to Civil Society in Singapore) and Sim Jui Liang (The Future of Ethnic-Based Civil Society in Singapore).*

*If you have comments or feedback, please email [ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg](mailto:ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg)*



© Copyright 2013 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.

*You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.*

**APPENDIX**Article 14, Constitution of Singapore<sup>3</sup>

14. – (1) Subject to clauses (2) and (3) –

- (a) every citizen of Singapore has the right to freedom of speech and expression;
- (b) all citizens of Singapore have the right to assemble peaceably and without arms; and
- (c) all citizens of Singapore have the right to form associations.

14. – (2) Parliament may by law impose –

(a) on the rights conferred by clause (1)(a), such restrictions as it considers necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of Singapore or any part thereof, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality and restrictions designed to protect the privileges of Parliament or to provide against contempt of court, defamation or incitement to any offence;

(b) on the right conferred by clause (1)(b), such restrictions as it considers necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of Singapore or any part thereof or public order; and

(c) on the right conferred by clause (1)(c), such restrictions as it considers necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of Singapore or any part thereof, public order or morality.

14 – (3) Restrictions on the right to form associations conferred by clause (1) (c) may also be imposed by any law relating to labour or education.

The Schedule [Societies Act, Sections 4(1) and 33A]<sup>4</sup>

## Specified Societies

1. Any society whose object, purpose or activity, whether primary or otherwise, is to -

- (a) represent;
- (b) promote any cause or interest of; or
- (c) discuss any issue relating to,

any religion, ethnic group, clan, nationality or a class of persons defined by reference to their gender or sexual orientation.

2. Any political association.

3. Any society which uses the word "National" or "Singapore" in its name, except where the word "Singapore" or any abbreviation thereof is used to indicate the society's place of registration.

3. Singapore Statutes Online, Attorney-General's Chambers, accessed 21 November 2013

4. Singapore Statutes Online, Attorney-General's Chambers, accessed 21 November 2013

4. Any society whose object, purpose or activity, whether primary or otherwise, is to -
  - (a) represent persons who advocate;
  - (b) promote; or
  - (c) discuss any issue relating to,
 

any civil or political right (including human rights, environmental rights and animal rights).
5. Any society whose object, purpose or activity, whether primary or otherwise, is to discuss any matter relating to the governance of the Singapore society.
6. Any society whose object, purpose or activity, whether primary or otherwise, is to promote or discuss the use or status of any language.
7. Any society which is formed under the instruction of a foreign government or an organisation affiliated to a foreign government.
8. Any society which is formed under the instruction of a foreign organisation or is affiliated to a foreign organisation or whose major source of funding is from outside of Singapore, but does not include the Rotaract Club, Rotary Club, Toastmaster's Club and the Lions Club.
9. Any alumni of an educational institution that is not established in Singapore.
10. Any society which has an office bearer who -
  - (a) was previously holding office in a society that was dissolved under section 24 and the order for dissolution was made less than 3 years ago;
  - (b) while being a member of any society, was convicted for an offence involving the unlawful expenditure of the funds of the society; or
  - (c) has been previously declared in writing by the Minister to be unfit to act as an officer of a society.
11. Any society whose object, purpose or activity, whether primary or otherwise, is to promote, discuss any issue relating to, or to provide training in any form of pugilistic or martial arts.

Public Order Act [Extracts]<sup>5</sup>

*From Part I, Preliminary*

Interpretation

2. – (1) In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires –

“assembly” means a gathering or meeting (whether or not comprising any lecture, talk, address, debate or discussion) of persons the purpose (or one of the purposes) of which is –

---

5. Singapore Statutes Online, Attorney-General's Chambers, accessed 22 November 2013

- (a) to demonstrate support for or opposition to the views or actions of any person, group of persons or any government;
- (b) to publicise a cause or campaign; or
- (c) to mark or commemorate any event,

and includes a demonstration by a person alone for any such purpose referred to in paragraph (a), (b) or (c);

"procession" means a march, parade or other procession (whether or not involving the use of vehicles or other conveyances) –

- (a) comprising 2 or more persons gathered at a place of assembly to move from that place substantially as a body of persons in succession proceeding by a common route or routes; and
- (b) the purpose (or one of the purposes) of which is –
  - (i) to demonstrate support for or opposition to the views or actions of any person, group of persons or any government;
  - (ii) to publicise a cause or campaign; or
  - (iii) to mark or commemorate any event,

and includes any assembly held in conjunction with such procession, and a march by a person alone for any such purpose referred to in paragraph (b)(i), (ii) or (iii);

"public assembly" means an assembly held or to be held in a public place or to which members of the public in general are invited, induced or permitted to attend;

"public place" means –

- (a) any place (open to the air or otherwise) to which members of the public have access as of right or by virtue of express or implied permission, whether or not on payment of a fee, whether or not access to the place may be restricted at particular times or for particular purposes, and whether or not it is an "approved place" within the meaning of the Public Entertainments and Meetings Act (Cap. 257); or
- (b) a part of a place that the occupier of the place allows members of the public to enter, but only while the place is ordinarily open to members of the public;

"public procession" means a procession in, to or from a public place;

#### *From Part II, Assemblies and Processions*

#### Regulation of public assemblies and public processions

5. – (1) Subject to the provisions of this Act, a public assembly and a public procession shall not take place unless –

(a) the Commissioner is notified under section 6 of the intention to hold the public assembly or public procession, and a permit is granted under section 7 in respect of that public assembly or public procession, as the case may be; and

(b) the holding of that public assembly or public procession is not prohibited under section 12 or 13.

(2) This section shall not apply to –

(a) an assembly or a procession exempted from this section under section 46; and

(b) an assembly or a procession within any part of an unrestricted area not falling within a special event area.

Sedition Act [Extract]<sup>6</sup>

Seditious tendency

3. – (1) A seditious tendency is a tendency –

(a) to bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the Government;

(b) to excite the citizens of Singapore or the residents in Singapore to attempt to procure in Singapore, the alteration, otherwise than by lawful means, of any matter as by law established;

(c) to bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the administration of justice in Singapore;

(d) to raise discontent or disaffection amongst the citizens of Singapore or the residents in Singapore;

(e) to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Singapore.

(2) Notwithstanding subsection (1), any act, speech, words, publication or other thing shall not be deemed to be seditious by reason only that it has a tendency –

(a) to show that the Government has been misled or mistaken in any of its measures;

(b) to point out errors or defects in the Government or the Constitution as by law established or in legislation or in the administration of justice with a view to the remedying of such errors or defects;

(c) to persuade the citizens of Singapore or the residents in Singapore to attempt to procure by lawful means the alteration of any matter in Singapore; or

(d) to point out, with a view to their removal, any matters producing or having a tendency to produce feelings of ill-will and enmity between different races or classes of the population of Singapore,

---

6. Singapore Statutes Online, Attorney-General's Chambers, accessed 22 November 2013



if such act, speech, words, publication or other thing has not otherwise in fact a seditious tendency.

(3) For the purpose of proving the commission of any offence under this Act, the intention of the person charged at the time he did or attempted to do or made any preparation to do or conspired with any person to do any act or uttered any seditious words or printed, published, sold, offered for sale, distributed, reproduced or imported any publication or did any other thing shall be deemed to be irrelevant if in fact such act had, or would, if done, have had, or such words, publication or thing had a seditious tendency.