

Managing Tensions in Singapore's Public Political Space

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When people are divided on especially contentious issues, face-to-face meetings in a neutral setting can be a useful means of tempering antagonisms among opponents. This was one of the key findings reported in "[SG50 and Beyond: Protecting the Public Space in the Era of Singaporean Pluralism](#)", an IPS Working Paper published on 5 August 2016. It was authored by Dr Johannis Bin Abdul Aziz, a former IPS Research Fellow, IPS Senior Research Fellows Dr Gillian Koh and Dr Mathew Mathews, and IPS Research Assistant Tan Min-Wei. As part of the study, the researchers conducted focus-group discussions with 47 participants who advocate different positions on LGBT rights and Sanctity of Life issues (such as abortion, the death penalty and euthanasia).

The scope of the study, noted the researchers, was political. Its aim was to help in the general effort of maintaining a peaceful public political space in which democratic values

could be practised well, especially in the case of value-laden public interest issues where positions seem irreducible and conflict, ineradicable.

The research methodology itself was as illuminating as the discussion itself. While the intention of the focus-group discussions was to gather information for the study rather than to promote discussion between the different sides, the researchers and participants found that the sessions actually helped create a “modality of engagement” that allowed different sides to understand one another and the different positions they held. As many of the participants had never met their opposing groups, the small setting allowed for fruitful and safe discussion.

“The biggest challenge we had was to convince participants that our focus-group discussions would be safe spaces for them to express their views, even though it would be in the presence of their issue opponents,” said Dr Johannis, who also wrote an [op-ed](#) about the project.



Dr Johannis Aziz

Social media and the new era of value pluralism

The aims of the project were to identify the specific basic points of contention of these groups and what they considered to be objectionable advocacy tactics used in recent years. A key question asked was whether or not there was a possibility to develop democratic principles and practices in the new era of Singapore pluralism.

This was especially pertinent as the government is perceived as reluctant to take the lead on moral issues in this era. This has given space to individuals and civil society groups to play a

larger role in the political space. For lobby groups on both ends of the spectrum, the rationale is that since the government would prefer to follow public sentiment, the best way to move the government would be to shift public opinion to their side.

The study came at a time when social media has paved the way for greater civil discourse online, allowing like-minded individuals to rally online easily. However, as the researchers observed, "there are no pre-existing social norms or rules that we can rely upon as a society to deal with the level of antagonism that this new period of disagreement can possibly give rise to on and offline."

The result is an age of unprecedented freedom for Singaporeans to express their views for which they may not be fully equipped to deal with. This is in line with what Dr Johannis deemed to be the most surprising finding of the study.

"The participants were generally reluctant to have anything they perceived as strong 'rules of engagement' for their online platforms. Although they complained about the objectionable behaviour they saw online, they were quite convinced that on balance, the extensive freedom of speech online was good for their cause — whichever side they were on."

He added, "To me, this is surprising, because I expected Singaporeans to like having rules for everything. But perhaps, that is an erroneous stereotype."

Results of the study

The study unearthed the following points of political and moral contention:

For LGBT rights:

1. Are LGBT persons born with their sexual identities or is it a choice? Following the latter, is choice a suitable principle to decide whether an identity is worth protecting?
2. How much status harm does the LGBT community face and is that relevant ground for being awarded protective rights?
3. Are the rights demanded by the LGBT community special or general?
4. In nominally secular Singapore, should religion play a role in the discourse over LGBT rights?
5. Are LGBT individuals fundamentally immoral or not?
6. While the LGBT group is a clear numerical minority in society, do anti-LGBT groups, as a small portion of Singaporeans who do not approve of LGBT communities, constitute a minority in their own right?
7. Both pro and anti LGBT rights advocates argued that the media was biased against them and for their opponents.

For Sanctity of Life issues:

1. Abortion: How to measure the value of the foetus in comparison to the value of the mother's life and life choices?
2. Death penalty: Should the state be able to make the choice given that the decision-making process in such cases cannot be infallible?
3. Euthanasia: who should make the final decision?

Whilst the opposing camps were split on the points of contention, the study found some areas of convergence. Both sides agreed that violence, hate speech and personal attacks should be avoided in advocacy work.

Ultimately, it appeared that neutral discussion platforms such as the FGDs conducted in the study would provide a suitable ground for future discussion. Despite the utility of social media as a platform, having face-to-face meetings would be more fruitful for civil discourse so that “competing claimant groups [would] see each other as rival competitors in the sporting arena rather than enemies on the battle field.” The researchers pointed out that a thriving democracy is not judged by how noisily or how raucously the various parties or factions battle for elections or policy decisions but by how committed everyone is to settling their differences through democratic means, no matter how much or how little they might disagree.

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