

## **Govt needs to 'radically rethink' way it engages with social issues to combat polarisation: Cherian George**

***"There's no negative correlation between good, strong governance and vibrant civil society activity," Cherian said.***

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In 1991, former Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo once argued that for ground-up, civic institutions to grow, the state needs to "withdraw a little and provide more space for local initiative".

Comparing the state to a banyan tree, a fig that spreads outwards indefinitely, Yeo said:

"The problem now is that under a banyan tree very little else can grow. When state institutions are too pervasive, civic institutions cannot thrive. Therefore it is necessary to prune the banyan tree so that other plants can also grow."

But maybe there is another aspect, one that is more benevolent, about the banyan tree.

**Cherian George, during a speech delivered at Singapore Perspectives 2025 organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on Jan. 20, 2025, noted that the banyan tree does not necessarily stifle the growth of what is beneath it.**

Rather, the banyan, Cherian said, remains "close to the ground", supporting and sustaining life around it:

"The banyan is strong and majestic, but it sustains diverse life beneath it, within it, on it, unlike the giant redwood."

As opposed to Yeo's argument, Cherian suggested that "the state does not need to retreat from its engagement with social issues." Rather, Cherian argued:

"The state overwhelms the society, but not because the state is too large or too capable. There's no negative correlation between good, strong governance and vibrant civil society activity."

Cherian, a professor in the Department of Journalism at the Hong Kong Baptist University, was speaking about how to fight political polarisation, which he defines as "us-them divides that make groups think of other groups as enemies who are not entitled to equal rights".

For Cherian, vibrant civil society activity allows people to engage in "dialogue and deliberation" that can counter "us-them divides".

### **"Misperceptions of polarisation become self-fulfilling"**

What does "dialogue and deliberation" look like?

Cherian pointed to the practice of citizens' assemblies in other countries like Brazil or Ireland.

Such assemblies gather people in groups of 30 to 100 to discuss controversial issues involving trade-offs or moral values, before presenting recommendations to lawmakers, Cherian explained.

Cherian, however, said that he would "not be surprised if most people in this room are sceptical" of such assemblies working, referring to the attendees of the Singapore Perspectives conference.

Cherian queried if the attendees would trust "ordinary citizens in heartland malls and MRT stations" to make "socially responsible decisions for the common good", predicting that most in the audience would not. He added:

"People tend to overestimate how divided their societies are and how unreasonable and even immoral others with different views and values are.

Now that doesn't mean that polarisation isn't real. Misperceptions of polarisation become self-fulfilling."

Cherian went on to cite three sources of political polarisation, which he argued is mostly driven "top-down": news media, social media, and political representatives.

According to Cherian, citizens' assemblies can mitigate and counter such polarisation:

"A face-to-face dialogue and deliberation works because it bypasses the political representatives and media that usually filter and distort our image of society and our social relations."

### **Low solidarity because of weak social integration with state**

Cherian added that "while polarisation is relatively low, solidarity among Singaporeans with different values and viewpoints is not as strong as it could be."

Cherian lay part of the blame for what he saw as "weak social integration" with the state.

Cherian raised instances of state action against "activists speaking out for Palestinians or migrant workers or against the death penalty or stronger climate action".

In Cherian's view, such groups "are not threats to national security or challenging Parliament's authority".

All the same, Cherian said that activists are "shut out of mainstream media and campuses, forced to be more creative, but hardly disruptive in their means of getting attention, and then subject to legal sanction and blacklisting when they do so."

### **Do we need to prune the banyan tree?**

Riffing on Yeo's metaphor of "pruning the banyan tree", Cherian described the People's Action Party (PAP) as an "overenthusiastic gardener, with shears and pesticides".

Cherian argued, in turn, that to counter polarisation the state needs to "radically rethink" the way it engages with social issues.

In particular, Cherian argued that civil society "suffers" not because the state is "omnipresent", but because it is "too authoritarian":

"I don't think we want to complain that we have a competent state or state that's too large.

No, the flaw in our model is the assumption that a capable state needs to be autocratic and cannot tolerate vigorous competition, nor contrary and dissenting voices in civil society."