

How Govt- civil society engagement can move forward

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Recent events in Government-civil society engagement have led to greater clarity on where each stands on civic activism.

The PAP Government has long taken the position that civil society organisations must stick to the objectives under which they are constituted in what they do.

As such, it has always watched out for occasions when the civil society organisations or really, their members, representatives or those it deems agents of such organisations move into party political, partisan spaces. Non-government organisations (NGOs) and voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) should not be used for partisan purposes. The principle behind such strict vigilance is this: No one should be operating under false pretences.

The two occasions that former Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) board director Mr Nizam Ismail was caught out on were very high-profile political events, with one that was clearly under the banner of Singapore's leading opposition party – a partisan, party platform. He took part in the first Population White Paper protest and appeared in a Workers' Party youth wing forum. He has argued for an alternative leadership that could elevate community issues into national issues, and a different approach to addressing the achievements of his community.

The Government's stance towards him demonstrates that its position on drawing such a line and maintaining it still remains – it may be 2013 but nothing has and will change. It reads his actions as a situation where AMP is mobilising for partisan ends on these two counts as well as now, in a clarification by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, the Community Forum proposal that Mr Nizam championed as an alternative platform for community issues at an AMP conference.

But we also see that civil society activists are not content with the idea that a person only has that one identity; that there is no leeway for speaking in one's "personal capacity" and not as an agent of an organisation that one might be closely associated with.

Now that the Government has clarified its position on how the rule is held to even in the case of the People's Action Party (PAP) Members of Parliament (MPs), I think it will mean that non-government activists are going to mark them by that measure.

In reality, both MPs and civic activists tend to wear many hats. It is therefore important that one is allowed to define which identity one is assuming and which organisation one is representing or acting as an agent for when one is speaking in the public square. Indeed, this is what

happens most of the time. (At my institute, we are always very careful to check how speakers wish to be billed at our events. Listing them with the incorrect affiliation would be a disaster.)

The public as well as our MPs and civic leaders are better served, if they can choose which identity they are operating under when they make public comments.

We are also better served if we can respect the possibility that there are occasions when one wishes to speak in one's 'personal capacity'.

This should be the more practical code of conduct, otherwise, can you imagine – political leaders and civic activists will have to account to all the organisations they might be associated with for their every utterance; that would be terribly onerous. As an analogy, even in parliament, there are occasions, albeit rare in Singapore, when the whip is lifted so that people can speak and vote according to their own consciences.

There is a different way of doing things that we might want to consider: Given the higher level of political activism that exists in Singapore today, it is actually more useful if political leaders and civic activists can sit and dialogue about points of disagreement to first understand what the common social issue at hand is about, and second, figure out where consensus can be had; and where finally, if they must disagree then how best to do it in an agreeable fashion. This can happen in face-to-face conferences or online.

They must model that process for broader society – let there be more understanding than conflict; more listening than shouting; and less need for the threat of or use of force, the law or show-downs. In this case, the AMP Board has made a clear stance which we respect as outsiders looking in. We also sympathise with Mr Nizam who feels misunderstood.

We also recognise the Government's serious concern to ensure that people and civic organisations seek to sway public opinion under false pretences. In that sense, it is alarming to hear the Government's case that the allegations of police brutality by Chinese bus drivers were baseless, and that there is an unseen hand that is keeping these allegations alive. We need more honesty and transparency all around. The tables are being turned on civil society that often campaigns for honesty and transparency in state action.

So the practical way forward – respect a speaker's own definition of his or her own identity when he or she speaks but also take the liberty to engage and dispute the speaker on what he or she is saying to arrive at the truth of the matter or to achieve better understanding of the situation. Focus on the issue at hand and resolve it if possible.

Out of tension, there can be resolution. There must be, if civil society-Government engagement is to continue for the benefit of society and country.

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