

I Am Not Alone

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2008 was the year when ordinary Singaporeans took to activism to a degree unprecedented in post-Third World Singapore. Although there are a number of reasons behind this surge in citizen engagement and advocacy, the Internet undoubtedly played a central role.

Among the acts of activism last year are: the protests by disgruntled Lehman investors; the poll by *The Online Citizen* website on the need for a Jurong Group Representation Constituency by-election there, and the presentation by Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong of the results to Parliament; a protest organised by The Online Citizen against transport fare hikes; a petition calling for polytechnic students to be spared the same fare increases; a proposal by bloggers to radically free up Internet censorship; the signature campaign against foreign worker quarters in Serangoon Gardens; the protest by students and alumnus against Nanyang Technological University's censorship of an article on Opposition politician Chee Soon Juan; and the slate of events following the death of J B Jeyaretnam.

The above list does not include the activism of seasoned campaigners from Dr Chee to Martyn See, Seelan Palay, Think Centre and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2). Indeed, that these are acts of the "average" person is their very significance.

What made 2008 the year of citizen activism?

Perhaps it was just an especially rich year for controversy. But that does not quite explain why there were several protests against transport fare increases last year but none in previous years. Neither does it explain why there was a demonstration against NTU's censorship and none by artists censored by the Government in the past.

Another reason could be the decision to allow demonstrations at Speakers' Corner. This certainly had a catalytic effect, but does not account for the campaigns held outside Hong Lim Park or which predated the liberalisation.

The main reason for the rise in dissent is what I will call the "I am not alone" effect. There are two aspects to this. First, when potential activists, protestors, campaigners, petition writers and their supporters noticed that other ordinary citizens who had fought other causes mostly got away with it, they began to realise that they were not alone in acting on their beliefs. That made them less fearful. Contrast this with the 70s and 80s when undergraduates had to be careful about being political at pain of expulsion, or even as recently as Catherine Lim's public ticking off in 1994.

Second, as a result of the Internet and tools such as email and blogs, potential activists were able to form or join communities of the like-minded. This made them feel that they were not alone. Realising that they are not alone emboldens people to turn thought to action.

In an atomised society like Singapore, the Internet's ability to let people connect to one another and feel they are part of a larger group (even if some choose to be anonymous) is its true power. That power is multiplied when a positive feedback loops forms: writing and sharing lead to action, which leads to more writing and sharing, and then more people joining in for even more action, and so on.

This "I am not alone" phenomenon, this network effect, is exactly what my colleague Arun Mahizhnan and I found in a study on the watershed Malaysian election last March. It was not just the materials on the Internet of official shenanigans and civil society campaigns, but also the way these materials swirled around via emails and hogged the chat rooms, online forums and blogs that led many to think that perhaps there were enough other people like themselves to make it worthwhile to make a stand - and perhaps make a difference. In other words, the "I am not alone" effect turned apathetic middle-class voters previously afraid to support the Opposition for fear of being in the minority, and hence singled out for reprisal, into openly anti-Barisan Nasional voters.

One interviewee told me, "One day in the bus someone suddenly shouted the name of an Opposition party. Everyone cheered. In the past, the other passengers would have quietly moved away from him."

Whether the momentum created last year for activism will build this year depends on several things. Chief among this is whether Government signals that it tolerates, or even welcomes activism, by ordinary citizens. Where activism is seen elsewhere as a vital to a healthy democracy, here it is often dismissed as a distraction or, worse, a hindrance to governance.

The Government may stay on the sidelines. Or it may decide to kill the chicken to frighten the monkeys. Doing the latter will certainly have a chilling effect. But given the desire of the Government to be seen as more tolerant and inclusive, a clampdown will also carry some political costs.

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