

Alcohol crackdown a policy overshoot?

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Critics of the temporary restrictions and security measures implemented in Little India soon after the riot have been quick to accuse the Government of overreacting.

The alcohol prohibitions under the Public Order (Additional Temporary Measures) Act, for instance, drew cries of "policy overshooting".

The Government's reaction appears excessive, said several business owners in Little India and some MPs, with some noting that the alcohol prohibitions were introduced months before the COI released its report.

Under the Act, which was passed in February and is valid for a year starting from April this year, alcohol consumption in public places is prohibited during weekends, from 6am on Saturday to 6am on Monday.

The prohibition also applies from 6am on the eve of public holidays to 6am on the day after the holiday. It is also now an offence to sell or supply alcohol at any premises in a special zone, with exceptions for certain circumstances such as for restaurants holding public house and beer house licences. These can continue their business by allowing the sale and consumption of alcohol in their premises.

Among the first to cry foul were liquor licence holders.

Mr Rajakumar Chandra, chairman of the Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association, tells Insight: "Before the riot, there were no such restrictions. The merchants said these impositions made them lose their main source of livelihood, and were an overreaction from the Government."

Nine MPs also rose in Parliament in February to criticise the Act when it was introduced as a Bill, with six opposing it altogether. Among the latter were members from the Workers' Party (WP), which took a party stance against the Bill.

WP chairman Sylvia Lim (Aljunied GRC) called the introduction of the Bill "hasty" and "a knee-jerk reaction".

But others, such as MP Denise Phua (Moulmein-Kallang GRC), found the restrictions to have been a long time coming.

She tells Insight that she and her residents in Little India "are generally satisfied with the post-riot measures".

"Many of them have called for the strict measures on alcohol sale and consumption in public places to remain on a permanent basis," she says. "Whether it is 'policy overshooting' or not, depends on who you speak with. To the residents who live in Little India, the general mood is to be safe than sorry."

Second Minister for Home Affairs S. Iswaran told Parliament on Feb 18, as the House debated the Bill's passage, that there was good reason that the new law appears to be alcohol-centric. "This is because we do not have provisions in our laws for such measures."

Mr Iswaran noted that "some have asked if we are jumping the gun", but said "the Bill introduces, out of necessity, targeted and temporary powers to restrict the sale, supply and consumption of alcohol".

Dr Tan Ern Ser, a sociology professor at the Institute of Policy Studies, notes the difficulty in trying to evaluate if the new policies amount to "an overkill" without conducting prolonged experiments testing variations of alcohol restrictions and their outcomes.

"In the absence of empirical data, it would seem logical to impose restrictions during known peak periods," says Dr Tan. "However, this should not prevent the authorities from making further adjustments, whether to reduce or increase the duration of restrictions in future."

Singapore Management University associate law professor Eugene Tan points out that it is easier to dial the restrictions "downwards following public feedback and debate", than to attempt to tighten them further after they are introduced.

The disparity between the policies pre-riot and post-riot may have also led some to perceive the new alcohol restrictions as "overshooting".

"That said, however, I do think that the Government views the post-riot alcoholic sale and consumption restrictions made for a necessary and proportionate response, considering the significance of alcohol as a contributory factor to the riot's escalation, as well as the longstanding social disamenities prior to the riot," he adds.

Dr Tan, on the other hand, is of the opinion that the Government "tends to be quite cautious in its approach, and its policies may sometimes come across as 'overshooting', especially in hindsight". But it is also "prepared to make adjustments in response to feedback".

On whether the restrictions were an overreaction or not, Dr Eduardo Araral, an assistant professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, says: "I understand the critics: shopkeepers will lose some business; some people prefer less restrictions; others would say it's not the alcohol that caused the riot.

"Civil servants might say it's easy to criticise policies if you are not on the receiving end of accountability. All of these are a healthy part of public discourse."

The Dec 8 riot in Little India was quelled within hours. By 6.45am the next day, roads where the violence - the worst in Singapore in more than 40 years - broke out were open to traffic. A national inquiry was convened almost immediately, and cooling measures such as a ban on public consumption and sale of alcohol were introduced. The Committee of Inquiry has now submitted its report, and eight recommendations on how to prevent a repeat of the incident have been accepted by the Government and debated in Parliament. Yet even as the dust settles, Insight's Hoe Pei Shan, Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh and Walter Sim ask: Are there issues that linger?