

Battle for the Middle Ground

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Some may be in the pink today or proud to wear white, but do most people on the little red dot even have a strong opinion either way on the gay rights issue?

Analysts whom Insight spoke to said that while most Singaporeans are conservative and think that gay sex is wrong or indeed, repulsive, the majority would not take the "extreme" stances of championing or protesting against gay rights.

After all, the electorate has traditionally been seen as one more interested in bread-and-butter issues such as job opportunities, cost of living, and income levels - although there have been instances of debates on "rights" issues having had political overtones before.

Perhaps the clearest indication that most Singaporeans sit on the fence is that neither of the two main political parties - the People's Action Party and the Workers' Party - has felt the need to take a strong pro-gay or pro-traditional family stand as a key theme of their election campaign.

Gay issues have reared their head in local politics, however. During the 2011 General Election, the PAP's Dr Vivian Balakrishnan pressed the Singapore Democratic Party on its stand on gay issues, after a video of star candidate Vincent Wijesingha participating in a gay forum surfaced. SDP secretary-general Chee Soon Juan quickly clarified that his party did not have a gay agenda.

Two years later, Dr Wijesingha came out as the country's first openly gay politician. He has since left the party to focus on his work as an activist.

Singapore's situation regarding the stance, or neutrality of, the two main political parties, is unlike the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States, where a party's stand on gay rights can make or break a candidate.

In other words, the pink-versus-white is still a battle at the fringes here. And it is a fight to win the hearts and minds of a placid middle ground. If that's possible in the first place.

"My own sense is that while a majority of Singaporeans may disapprove of gay practices, they take the stand that people should have the freedom to choose how they want to live their lives, as long as they do not impose their values and preferences on others," says sociologist Tan Ern Ser. "This reflects post-materialist values supportive of self-expression."

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Mathew Mathews thinks there will be more "activistic" campaigning to come. "Over the years, as the world changes, more values will be different. You can expect quite a lot of alternative ways of doing things, and more debates in return," he says. "I don't expect there to be any less."

At a Straits Times forum in April, Mr Hri Kumar Nair, an MP for Bishan Toa-Payoh GRC, made a similar observation that such "non-bread-and-butter issues" will gain in prominence going forward. "Particularly for the young, for whom these things such as freedom of speech

and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) rights are important. They'll want to know what their MPs are doing (about them)," he said.

That might be why gay activists think a visible presence is necessary to put a human face to what could be seen as an ideological debate.

Pink Dot spokesman Paerin Choa notes: "The majority of Singaporeans are people who want to get on with their lives, their jobs, be with their families. In this respect the LGBT community is no different - and this is one important message Pink Dot has always communi-cated since its inception.

However, a growing number of families and "straight" allies attend Pink Dot each year, he adds, "which shows that support from the more moderate segments of society is growing, and growing fast".

And perhaps that is why the likes of Reverend Lawrence Khong and Islamic religious teacher Noor Deros are resisting Pink Dot, and audibly so.

Rev Khong says he finds most disconcerting how Pink Dot is being "used as a platform for public persuasion and influence". He adds PM Lee Hsien Loong had said in 2007 that "we do not approve of (homosexuals) actively promoting their lifestyles to others, or setting the tone for mainstream society". "So why are we giving Pink Dot leeway to promote their alternative lifestyles in such a high-profile way? I would like to see our government leaders draw a clear line on where they now stand with regard to this moral issue."

Such inherently different viewpoints are not surprising, says Professor Tan. "The anti-gay rights activists want to mobilise constituents to stand up and be counted, while the pro-gay activists want to convince the middle ground that while it is different, it is not deviant, but normal."

For both sides, the unfolding debate can be seen as their jostling for space in the public policy sphere - even as a large swathe of Singaporeans appear content to keep their counsel.