# Negotiating Singapore's new pluralism

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***The Straits Time,*** 19 April 2016

In the space of three short months recently, Singaporean society witnessed outpourings of concern over the planned public performances of two major international stars: Adam Lambert and Madonna.

Last November, an online petition that objected to Lambert's "promotion of a highly sexualised lifestyle and LGBT rights" collected about 20,000 signatures. In February, it was reported in the news that eight pastors representing various Christian denominations met Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam to express concerns over possible religiously offensive content in Madonna's planned concert.

In each case, heated discussions followed everywhere online as ordinary Singaporeans argued for and against the merits of these objections.

These events point to two interesting features of current Singaporean politics.

First, while once communal concerns over issues of public morality were largely dealt with behind closed doors, over the past 10 years or so we have begun to see public lobbying over moral and cultural issues such as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual) rights, "sanctity of life" issues including abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia and others like the decision to build integrated resorts.

Second, social media platforms have become part of our public political space – an important outlet for people sharing political news and opinions – but some of this public interaction has historically been less than civil.

It was a product of these two observations that the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) recently carried out a study on "The New Singaporean Pluralism". This involved closed-door focus group discussions and individual interviews with many prominent public advocates on all sides of the issues of LGBT rights and the "sanctity of life".

We attempted to identify the specific basic points of contention and the objectionable advocacy tactics that have been used in recent years. But more importantly, we attempted to tease out the potential principles and practices of governance that may help maintain the civility of our shared political space so as to be able to apply them to future disagreements.

Some of the points of contention were expected. For example, LGBT rights advocates want the LGBT community to have protective rights because having an LGBT identity is not a choice, whereas anti-LGBT rights advocates think otherwise. They believe that even if same-sex attraction is not a choice, same-sex sexual behaviour is inescapably a choice. Whether LGBT identities are choices is an empirical question that scientists all over the world are still trying to answer, but since the issue is shifting towards behaviour rather than attraction, in the eyes of anti-LGBT rights advocates, even finding the gay gene may not be sufficient to convince them that LGBT persons deserve protective rights.

As for "sanctity of life" issues, it was perhaps also no surprise that each constituent issue revolved around contentions about how to measure the value of a life against other goods like autonomy or public safety, or how to measure longer lives against better quality lives. Of course, unsurprisingly, the role of the government and its ability to make final decisions in these areas is contentious as well.

These findings point towards a need for further research on the empirical claims of all sides of the two topics, but whether empirical evidence will settle these issues is an open question, because these types of disagreement are at bottom based on differences in how we value certain goods and principles. In order to maintain the civility of our political space, what we need are ways to manage these cleavages without either suppressing them or letting them boil over into violence.

Thus, it is heartening to note that there was a consensus against using hate speech, dehumanising speech and name-calling in public advocacy. It is interesting to note, however, the difficulties in the details.

First, there is little agreement on what exactly constitutes such unacceptable speech. Second, different groups and organisations have different levels of tolerance for these practices. And third, advocates can easily offend their opponents without meaning to. For example, the word "lifestyle" is intended by anti-LGBT rights advocates here to neutrally describe LGBT identities; however, the term is considered offensive in the LGBT community because the word implies that their identities are choices and it is taken as trivialising their identities.

Despite the kind of unsavoury language that might be used in online political discussions regarding moral and cultural disagreements, the majority of our participants valued the freedom of speech and information made possible by social media too much to try to institute further controls – though how effective communal self-policing can be going forward remains an open question.

It was nevertheless suggested that we would do well to teach civic and democratic values in schools. Our youth would learn not only how to comport themselves civilly in the unmediated realm of social media but also how to honestly negotiate democratic practices such as debating and lobbying for support. All these require them to develop the type of empathy needed to understand the perspectives of opponents even while fighting their own corner.

Additionally, the experiences we had in organising the focus group discussions were instructive on how we may be able to minimise the hostility and demonisation that often accompany such moral and cultural cleavages.

Beyond the more obvious principles such as having discussion platforms that are neutral as well as sufficiently authoritative to guarantee privacy and security, we learnt that having face-to-face meetings and the telling of stories help humanise each side to the other, impeding the tendency to demonise opponents and project sinister motivations on them. After all, in the new era of value pluralism, we cannot put the genie back in the bottle. Unlike the socio-economic issues that continue to dominate much of our local politics, we are seeing more and more disagreement regarding moral and cultural issues for which objective rational consensus is impossible.

In order to negotiate this new politics, we need new democratic tools. The sooner we learn how to talk among ourselves as well as with the authorities in multi-logical processes, the healthier our political space will be. We have to learn how to treat new laws and policies as provisional decisions still open to future challenge, because only then can losing sides have hope for the future and remain justifiably committed to the democratic process instead of using force. We have to learn to agree to disagree and take every loss on the chin, knowing that there will always be a rematch.

These new democratic practices are not perfect, but against a background of irreducible pluralism, they can help reaffirm a unity of purpose where a unity of views is impossible.

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