

When Protests Cross the Line

Public opinion has been charged over the Hong Lim Park disturbance last Saturday, when a protest against the Central Provident Fund (CPF) disrupted a charity carnival. Walter Sim and Rachel Au-Yong examine what the incident means for civil society discourse in Singapore.

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The rallying cries of activist Han Hui Hui at Hong Lim Park could be heard two blocks away at Hong Lim Complex at 4.05pm, on a particularly hot day when the thermometer hit 34 deg C.

With a charity carnival by voluntary welfare organisation YMCA called Proms@the Park going on at the same time last Saturday, the 22-year-old organiser of the fourth Return Our CPF protest at the park yelled into a microphone a laundry list of her misgivings with the Government. She was dogged in making herself heard from an elevated mound at one corner.

Several hundred people, largely retirees, turned up to hear Ms Han and blogger Roy Ngerng, 33, speak about Central Provident Fund issues.

Some brandished placards bearing slogans like "Do you want to work till you drop dead?"

The first - in this case, innocuous - intermingling of two quite separate events happened when many of the protesters took shelter from the heat under the YMCA's main tent.

However, at about 4.25pm, a line was crossed in the park's tradition of you-do-your-event, we-will-conduct-ours, all in a peaceable, non-encroaching manner.

A group of elderly charity recipients invited to the YMCA carnival entered the park from near Ms Han's spot, and she turned to face them. Directly addressing the group, she started speaking in Mandarin on issues like the Pioneer Generation Package, even as YMCA volunteers quickly ushered them away.

Mr Ngerng - who is being sued for defamation by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong - spoke shortly after. He yelled: "Are you happy with our CPF?", sparking chants of "Return Our CPF" from some in the audience.

He thanked everyone present - including YMCA volunteers and elderly charity recipients - saying: "We know that some of you cannot clap, but thank you for supporting us."

He also thanked the YMCA for inviting Minister of State (Trade and Industry) Teo Ser Luck as its guest of honour, so that "we can protest to a minister".

Mr Teo arrived at about 4.50pm and opened the YMCA Proms @ The Park event.

Moments later, Ms Han and Mr Ngerng led their group on a march around the park, encroaching into YMCA's space.

Waving Singapore flags, they stopped near the stage, in front of which sat rows of elderly guests, and shouted chants, including "Return Our CPF" and "Vote Them Out, PAP".

These chants were apparently directed at Mr Teo, who was speaking to the audience of seated senior citizens. Jeering was also heard.

At the same time, a group of special needs children, the Y Stars, had taken to the stage for their dance item.

Several children, shocked by the rowdiness, missed a beat. The performance had to be restarted.

The aftermath: On Monday, Mr Teo apologised for the inconvenience caused by his presence, while a request from Mr Ngerng to meet the children and their parents was rebuffed.

On Tuesday, Madam Regina Aun, 55, manager of Y Stars, said in The Straits Times: "I've consulted the parents, and all of them are not in favour. I've read his (Mr Ngerng's) interpretation of the sequence of events on his blog, and I don't agree with some of his explanations."

And to Insight, YMCA general secretary Lo Chee Wen said: "The march into our event area was not expected."

He added that the YMCA has been following up to make sure that those who were at the concert are all right, and rendering assistance when needed.

Insight examines the issues surrounding civil society discourse that the disturbance - which is now a police matter - has thrust into the spotlight.

WHY WERE SINGAPOREANS SHOCKED?

Last Saturday was the first disorderly incident since the Speakers' Corner was set up in Hong Lim Park back in 2000, and so, puts the park's history of protest gatherings conducted with a relative degree of civil decorum to the test.

Having different events on at the same time at the park is nothing new. As many as three events have been held concurrently at the 6,000 sq m park.

The National Parks Board (NParks), which manages the park, said that where there is more than one application, it manages them on a first-come, first-served basis. Its approach has been to allow the sharing of space and it had not needed to allocate space previously when it got more than one application, and there had been no adverse or disorderly incidents.

No wonder, then, that Saturday's unravelling of that decorum has largely been frowned upon, with opposition party members and even civil society activists weighing in.

They say that encroaching on the space and rights of other people was uncalled for, especially when the elderly and special needs children were present.

Mr Harish Pillay, former president of the now-defunct civil society group The Roundtable, told Insight that the actions by the protesters - from the consensus of accounts of what happened - are "highly deplorable".

"The CPF protesters impinged upon a group that had nothing to do with their issues, except by a tangential notion - the presence of a member of the political ruling party," he explained. "There is never any way to justify bad and uncouth behaviour, no matter what the cause."

Political watchers say Ms Han and Mr Ngerng's actions undermine their efforts to appeal to Singaporeans and to spread the message they uphold.

Many would construe their actions as how they choose to govern themselves and, by extension, the values they hope will come to regulate the broader community, experts say.

"It is clear that Ngerng and Han are angry and they say they are angry on behalf of the Singaporean community - how will the broader Singaporean community feel about being represented by them and in this manner?" asked Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Gillian Koh.

Compare Ms Han's Return Our CPF protests, held four times this year, with other movements-with-a-cause that have emerged.

The gay rights movement Pink Dot drew a record 26,000 turnout this year at its annual mass picnic at the park.

Pink Dot comes across as "warm and positive", instead of "angry and volatile", pointed out sociologist Tan Ern Ser of the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Polarising, aggressive tactics put some people off, even if they are empathetic to the message, said political watcher Eugene Tan, a law don at Singapore Management University (SMU).

Indeed, there are expectations of civility in an increasingly active civil society arena.

Dr Koh said it was "regrettable" the situation arose. "It is a pity the protesters would not yield and no compromise could be found. This, when all parties have the declared and shared goal of doing their best and acting in goodwill for Singaporeans."

Regardless of the case, rules of civil decorum apply.

PAP MP Alvin Yeo (Chua Chu Kang GRC), a senior counsel with WongPartnership, said there are many ways to be heard, from letters to the mainstream media, social media and dialogue.

"Nobody is stopping you from spouting your views. You're not being shut off and therefore have to resort to guerilla tactics."

Indeed, rather than outright confrontation, fellow Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad tapped the media and employed dialogue with the Government when he agitated against university fee hikes during the Asian financial crisis of 1997.

The two-term president of the Nanyang Technological University Students' Union also worked with his NUS counterparts. Reflecting on the efforts, he said: "It was not unreasonable to voice out when all our parents were seeing so many uncertainties.

"Even without Hong Lim Park or social media, it was possible to negotiate a solution peacefully."

The widespread criticism of last Saturday's incident is a positive force for civil society here, said former Nominated MP (NMP) Geh Min, an environmentalist who has lobbied for the conservation of Chek Jawa.

"People were largely able to respond in a way that could distinguish between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable," the eye surgeon said, although she added that some criticism appears to have gone overboard.

WHAT ARE THE ACCEPTABLE PARAMETERS FOR DISCOURSE?

Clearly, mutual respect is crucial to civil society flourishing, even if views differ starkly.

NUS law don and former attorney-general Walter Woon said: "Everyone has a responsibility not to interfere with other people's legitimate pursuits and interests."

Learning to "disagree without being disagreeable" enables a free market of opinions which activists should take heed of even while championing their cause, say experts.

Perhaps that might explain why several anti-establishment figures have distanced themselves from last Saturday's incident.

These figures were attempting to frame the "tone and expectations of responsibility in civil society", said SMU's Prof Tan, who was a former NMP.

NUS' Dr Tan added that they might have seen the need to ensure that the public "continue to perceive them as credible and the voice of reason".

Politicising a charity event held by a non-profit organisation by virtue of the attendance of a government minister was misguided, add civil society proponents.

Opposition figure Nicole Seah called for rationality, and cautioned against being blinded by protest. She said: "It's not a dog and pony show. When you discuss policy, there are people's lives involved."

Yet confrontation may be a deliberate strategy to draw eyeballs. Prof Woon said: "Very often, they are posturing for the Western press, portraying themselves as martyrs for human rights. They aren't primarily concerned with the public good."

Or there could be rationalisation that "extreme" measures are needed to achieve a breakthrough.

NUS' Dr Tan said: "Adopting such a stand allows them to resolve whatever cognitive dissonance they may have."

HAS THE PROTEST DONE A DISSERVICE TO CIVIL SOCIETY?

Experts see the disturbance as an isolated incident and not one that will escalate into anything of wider concern.

Clashes like last Saturday's are teething issues for a growing democracy, they say.

If anything, the incident is a mistake to learn from, said Singapore Democratic Party chief Chee Soon Juan. Dr Chee and his sister Chee Siok Chin have served time and paid fines for several run-ins with the law, mainly for acts of civil disobedience, such as making speeches without permits and staging processions at the Istana.

Dr Chee wrote on the party blog: "Let us recognise that democracy - and its development - is a messy process, and that those who seek to advocate and build it will always fumble and get it wrong. We would not be human if we didn't."

Mr Pillay said: "Just as there are bad actors in the political space, and even within the ruling party, there will be situations where bad behaviour surfaces."

With more online campaigns spilling over to the real world, there will be more people hoping to lobby their causes at Hong Lim Park.

Acts such as physical occupation suggest higher levels of commitment from participants and hence help such campaigns gain more traction in the real world, said Dr Carol Soon, who studies digital engagement at IPS.

And as the nature of such protests is open, people may differ in their approaches and intensity of emotions, said the president of human rights group Maruah, Ms Braema Mathi.

Yet, all these voices will add to the overall conversation on how Singapore can improve as a society. So rather than a disservice to civil society, such disturbances can help society define what civil norms are, said former NMP Zulkifli Baharudin.

As in last Saturday's case, the protest and subsequent reaction honed the ability of Singaporeans to discern, political watchers say.

Social entrepreneur and NMP Kuik Shiao-Yin praised non-PAP supporters for publicly stating their disagreement, a move that takes "personal courage".

She wrote on Facebook: "Not all segments of their supporters would understand or appreciate their 'betrayal' of the opposition."

WHAT'S NEXT FOR PUBLIC PROTESTS IN SINGAPORE?

Could Saturday's disturbance have been avoided with better guidelines from NParks?

Certainly, say most people who spoke to Insight. NParks could have been clearer about the rules, such as whether speakers are confined to certain areas of the park, or if a group that registers earlier gets first dibs.

But beyond administrative details, was NParks blindsided by what transpired last Saturday?

Mr Zaqy thought NParks should have known better: "Given that this particular group (referring to Ms Han and Mr Ngerng) has a certain track record, I'm surprised they didn't find it a risk."

And since the raison d'etre of the Speakers' Corner is to allow people to gather regardless of reason - whether peaceful or to complain - not taking adequate measures to avoid a clash is unwise, said Mr Zulkifli.

"When people gather, emotions run high, the worst can happen. Singapore is no exception," he added.

Indeed, NParks responded to Insight yesterday and disclosed that it may introduce some changes.

"To mitigate potential public-order incidents, the Singapore Police Force and NParks may put in place appropriate measures or engage organisers prior to the event to explain the rules and regulations, remind them to act responsibly, observe NParks' regulations and abide by the laws," a spokesman said.

In demanding better guidelines from NParks, some have asked that the Speakers' Corner be reserved for protests and demonstrations. It remains the only outdoor venue for Singaporeans to give speeches without a Public Entertainment Licence, they argue.

Others say it should not be used for family-oriented events, given its politically-charged atmosphere.

Such requests are understandable, said Ms Mathi, even if she disagrees with having more restrictions imposed.

Civil society jealously guards Hong Lim Park, as it is the only permitted space to express views, she said. "It was a hard-won space, and event organisers need to decide if the Speakers' Corner is really the best place for them."

If restrictions are to be placed on the park, it must come from civil society, not Government, says SMU's Prof Tan.

"I hope the Government does not over-react and over-police the Speakers' Corner. That would go against the spirit of letting civil society grow as part of our political development," he said.

Perhaps opening up more venues for permit-free speeches and protests might help alleviate the strain, Ms Mathi suggested.

But PAP's Mr Yeo observes that the usage of Hong Lim Park has not reached its tipping point.

"Certainly, if there are not enough spaces, then consideration should be given," he said. "But I'm not sure whether last Saturday is proof that demand is heavy."

If more venues are not on the table, what about other forms of expression, like the freedom to march, as Ms Han has asked for?

Again, reactions are mixed.

"Denying (civil protest) is not healthy in the long run because the fissures and fracture points will not be exposed and may get exposed at a more inopportune time," said Mr Pillay.

But this will come at a cost to society, said Prof Woon. "We have already seen how a small accident can snarl up traffic. Imagine what a march on Parliament would do."

The former attorney-general added: "Confrontation in order to change the law is antithetical to the rule of law."

Perhaps whatever changes that civil society in Singapore undergoes will be made in small, incremental steps, rather than sparked by over-exuberant catalysts.

"Singaporeans would still go for the substance of the discourse, not the form, especially if it is likely to disrupt public order and peace," said Prof Tan.

And so, a line might have been crossed last Saturday, but the immediate pushback shows that certain norms remain.

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