

## Ban on film lifted

**Teo Xuanwei**

**Today**, 12 September 2009

AFTER more than four years, film-maker Martyn See's *Singapore Rebel*, a documentary on opposition politician Chee Soon Juan, has finally been approved for viewing here by those aged 18 years and above.

While commentators see as "irrelevant" the audience impact of the Media Development Authority's (MDA) lifting of the ban on Friday - given how the 26-minute video has been available online and viewed more than 400,000 times to date - they hail it as a symbolic move that marks the first signs of a more relaxed political space.

It follows changes to the Films Act in March, which saw the easing of a decade-long ban on all political films. Those with factual footage, documentaries and recordings of live events are now allowed.

Still, just how much clarity did the authority's decision on *Singapore Rebel* bring to film-makers hoping to explore the new OB markers?

In a brief statement, the MDA said the Political Films Consultative Committee (PFCC) "is of the view that *Singapore Rebel* is a documentary film" falling within statutory exclusions. It, therefore, "should not be regarded as a party political film".

While hailing this milestone as having "set the stage for future political films others might want to make", MP for Hong Kah GRC Zaqy Mohamad noted: "Elaborating on the considerations in evaluating films would serve as a guide for future projects, and people would be less worried about making such films."

Though Mr Tan Tarn How views the ban's lifting as a "big step forward to a more liberal regime", the Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow said: "The M18 rating is largely meaningless because in an Internet era, anybody of any age can access the film." And the mere fact that the Government still sets markers shows the amended laws remain "problematic", he argued.

Whether this first clearing of a banned film signals "true and genuine liberalisation", in legal counsel Siew Kum Hong's view, will depend on how the PFCC rules on the next three to five new films.

Both Mr Siew and Mr Tan also wished the "reasons and thinking process" of the PFCC had been revealed to the public.

When asked for elaboration by *Weekend Today*, Ms Amy Chua, who chairs the Board of Film Censors, noted that the Films Act amendment allowed for more political films that "do not dramatise and/or present a distorted picture". Mr See had "requested his film be assessed as a documentary without any animation and composed wholly of an accurate account depicting actual events, persons or situations", she said.

Approving, law Professor Thio Li-ann said: "Singaporeans should be exposed to the lives and works of Singaporean politicians who are not from the establishment, so they can get a fuller picture of politics here and to make up their own minds ... You cannot be informed without viewpoint diversity."

For now, Mr See said he has no plans to screen *Singapore Rebel* locally or abroad. He intends to submit his other banned film *Zahari's 17 Years* for evaluation.

Only one other film has been referred to the PFCC for assessment - *For I am a Young Singaporean* submitted by the Young PAP, still under review.