Cherian George criticises Singapore's top-down approach, urges collaborative engagement with civil society

In a renewed critique, Professor Cherian George urged the Singapore government to reconsider its approach to civil society, advocating for more collaborative and trust-building engagement with social issues rather than top-down authority.

Speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference on 20 January, George criticised the exclusion of advocacy groups from mainstream platforms, arguing their efforts to shift public attitudes are not threats to national security.

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SINGAPORE: In a renewed critique, Cherian George, Professor of Media Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University, called for the Singapore government to reconsider its approach, advocating for more collaborative and trust-building engagement with social issues, rather than imposing top-down authority for genuine community solidarity.

During a panel discussion titled "Community and the State" at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference on 20 January, George revisited the banyan tree metaphor, which was first introduced by former Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo in his 1991 speech.

At the time, Yeo had argued that for ground-up civic institutions to flourish, the state needed to "withdraw a little and provide more space for local initiative."

Comparing the state to a banyan tree, Yeo, a fig tree that spreads outward indefinitely, stated: "The problem now is that under a banyan tree very little else can grow. "
"When state institutions are too pervasive, civic institutions cannot thrive. Therefore, it is necessary to prune the banyan tree so that other plants can also grow."

However, George countered that the banyan tree does not inherently stifle growth beneath it.

Instead, the banyan "remains close to the ground," sustaining diverse life around it, "The banyan is strong and majestic, but it sustains diverse life beneath it, within it, and on it, unlike the giant redwood."

In contrast to Yeo's argument, George contended that "the state does not need to retreat from its engagement with social issues."

Rather, he argued, "The state overwhelms society, not because it is too large or capable, but because it suppresses the vibrancy of civil society."

He proposed that the PAP should be viewed as the gardener, rather than the banyan tree itself, suggesting that the government has been too focused on controlling and correcting citizens' behaviour.

"Unwittingly, George Yeo highlighted the problem: he reflected the PAP's techno-authoritarian impulse, deeply distrustful of life around them, believing that educated elites must use their superior capacities to correct citizens' ways."

George Highlights Overestimation of Societal Divides and Misperceptions of Others in Political Polarisation

In his [address](#) at the event, discussing political polarisation, George clarified that polarisation is not about differences in views or beliefs but about deep "us-them" divides, where opposing groups see each other as enemies rather than competitors. This lack of mutual respect undermines negotiation, compromise, and, ultimately, democracy.

He believed that the antidote to polarisation lies in building a larger "we" that recognises shared needs and cross-cutting identities, without erasing differences or imposing forced consensus.

George shared lessons from projects across different countries and highlighted the potential of dialogue and deliberation over traditional debates, which focus on settling arguments and declaring winners.

Properly designed conversations encourage listening and understanding, fostering collective learning and empathy.

George Highlights Media, Social Media, and Politicians as Drivers of Polarisation

George explained that deliberative forums, typically organised in small groups with trained facilitators, foster empathy and reduce animosity, even if participants do not change their views.

The most institutionalised form, citizens' assemblies, involve diverse groups discussing controversial issues and presenting recommendations to lawmakers.

George further noted that people tend to overestimate how divided their own societies are, and how unreasonable and even immoral others may be.

Most people trust themselves to make responsible decisions for the common good but are less confident in others, especially those outside their immediate circle, he said.

He pointed out that these perceptions of others are shaped by three main sources: news media, social media, and political representatives, which tend to highlight conflict and amplify negative portrayals of groups.

Politicians and elites often drive top-down polarisation to create distinctions for their own advantage, further influencing public perceptions of others.

"Face-to-face dialogue and deliberation work because they bypass the political representatives and media that usually filter and distort our social relations," George remarked.

George Emphasises Need for Balance Between a High-Capacity State and Vibrant Society

In analysing Singapore's polarisation, George explained that the country has been spared the worst for two key reasons.

First, Singapore has a long tradition of responsive government, which has prevented communities from experiencing the prolonged insecurity that often drives them toward populism.

Second, because the major political parties are not ethnic-based, the risk of sectarian or religious-secular conflict is significantly lowered.

George acknowledged the concerns about the state of community in Singapore, noting that the country lacks the horizontal, people-to-people trust necessary for community to flourish.

Reflecting on the question of whether the government has "crowded out" opportunities for organic engagement, he recalled George Yeo's metaphor of "pruning the banyan tree" from over 30 years ago but disagreed with the idea of pruning.

In the book *PAP v PAP*, co-authored with Donald Low, George argued that while Singapore's capable state has proven vital during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, the issue lies in the assumption that such a state must be autocratic and suppress competition or dissent within civil society.

Drawing from Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's *The Narrow Corridor*, George emphasised the need for a high-capacity state and a vibrant society to complement each other, a balance that Singapore has yet to achieve, as the state currently overwhelms society.

Activist Groups Not a Threat to Singapore's National Security

George also criticised the government's approach to managing differing views, arguing that groups advocating for causes like Palestinian rights, migrant worker welfare, the abolition of the death penalty, or stronger climate action are not threats to national security or parliamentary authority.

Instead, they aim to shift public attitudes and values, yet are often excluded from mainstream media and academic spaces, pushed to adopt unconventional methods to gain attention, only to face legal penalties and blacklisting.

"They are just trying to persuade their fellow citizens and shift public attitudes and values in ways that policymakers cannot ignore," said George.

He highlighted the government's overregulation of areas like theatre, where even plays discussing environmental or political issues are flagged for potential public harm, reinforcing the idea that citizens need state protection from alternative viewpoints.

This approach has been internalized by the media, which has grown more averse to controversy over the past three decades, and by universities like NUS, which now require faculty to assess the controversial nature of talks before they proceed.

Geroge warned the indirect cost of the government's approach to managing differing views, oting that it has led to a perception among Singaporeans that minority opinions and controversial views are dangerous and should be excluded.

He argued that the state has fostered a culture of vertical trust in leaders but horizontal distrust among citizens, creating a societal divide where the people are viewed as self-centered and untrustworthy.

This pattern, he said, echoes colonial-era divide-and-rule tactics, which have left Singaporeans with little trust in one another and a reliance on the state to manage relationships.