

Pruning the banyan: balancing governance and growth in Singapore's political ecosystem

Ravi Philemon reflects on Cherian George's banyan tree analogy, highlighting that pruning is essential for balance in Singapore's political ecosystem. Unchecked dominance stifles diversity and growth, and true change comes from citizens voting to trim the tree, fostering enterprise and compassion.

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I read Cherian George's [text of his talk](#) at the Institute of Policy Studies – IPS' Singapore Perspectives conference on 20 January 2025.

His reflections on George Yeo's banyan tree analogy offer valuable insights into Singapore's political ecosystem. However, in my view, his perspective on the banyan's nature and its implications for governance in a small, dense country like Singapore could benefit from further nuance.

Cherian asserts that "banyan trees in nature do not need pruning." While this may be true in expansive natural environments, it doesn't hold in managed ecosystems like Singapore. His portrayal of pruning as inherently destructive fails to consider that careful trimming is necessary for balance and coexistence.

In the late 1990s, I worked at an organisation in McNair Road where a large banyan tree stood prominently. Beneath its canopy, I discovered snake sheddings, and I suspected that some might have been from cobras. Concerned for the safety of my clients, I made the decision that the tree needed to be pruned. I presented a strong case to NParks, emphasising the risks, and succeeded in having it trimmed. This experience reinforced for me that even majestic trees need pruning when they pose dangers to their surroundings.

Arborists agree with me, explaining that unchecked banyans can become hazardous—not only to other plants but also to people. Dead limbs fall, roots disrupt the soil, and termites infest.

Similarly, unchecked power can jeopardise the very stability it is meant to uphold. In Singapore's case, pruning prevents the banyan from overshadowing all else, disrupting infrastructure, and monopolising resources. In a tightly managed society, unchecked dominance—whether of trees or political systems—stifles diversity and innovation. Pruning, far from being destructive, ensures balance, coexistence, and sustainable growth.

The talk acknowledges that the state overwhelms society in Singapore but seems to underplay the long-term effects of this imbalance. A centralised system may provide stability, but without deliberate efforts to "prune" and empower alternative voices, society becomes overly dependent on the state, unable to cultivate the horizontal trust vital for resilience. The banyan analogy fits here: its sprawling canopy, unchecked, suppresses everything beneath it.

Could the recent controversies involving Former Transport Minister S Iswaran, Tan Chuan-Jin's resignation, the Ridout Road saga, and the fugitive status of Lee Hsien Yang indicate that the large banyan tree of Singapore needs trimming? Are these signs that unchecked

dominance may have fostered complacency and systemic vulnerabilities, requiring pruning to restore accountability and balance?

While he suggests that strong governance and civil society can coexist, Singapore's dominant governance model shows that coexistence requires more than intention. It demands recalibration of the power dynamic. The state's banyan-like dominance leaves little room for the diversity of voices and initiatives essential for societal growth. Trimming this dominance isn't an attack on governance—it's a step toward nurturing a thriving political and social ecosystem.

The talk's points about polarised democracies and the role of dialogue are compelling, but the very engagement he advocates struggles to take root in Singapore's tightly controlled environment. For dialogue to flourish, there must be space for civil society to breathe—something the banyan analogy aptly highlights.

In the early years of Singapore's independence, some critics likened the People's Action Party to being stooges of the colonialists. If this view has merit, then the PAP's growth mirrors the banyan's origins as a parasitic sprout. Drawing strength from the ideals of plurality and freedoms that defined its early years, the banyan has since grown to dominate its surroundings.

As Cherian George pointed out, the British colonial masters justified their dominance by deeming Asian natives unfit for democracy, maintaining power through divide and rule. Similarly, the question today is whether the PAP's dominance has become counterproductive, blocking out the light needed for other voices to grow.

I think the critique of the banyan tree analogy is perceptive but incomplete. In Singapore's context, pruning isn't about weakening the tree—it's about preserving a balanced and thriving ecosystem. A well-tended banyan provides shade without suffocating the growth beneath it, ensuring that all parts of the environment flourish.

Cherian is perhaps too optimistic, as the people of his generation often are, hoping the PAP will recalibrate its dominance to become more benevolent and allow diversity to thrive. But entrenched power rarely shifts out of goodwill.

From Operation Spectrum's arrests of activists in 1987 to charging a man for holding a smiley-face sign near a police station, to using POFMA against a property agent speaking about HDB's Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP), the banyan has overshadowed too much.

True change will come not from hope, but from the votes of the people to trim the tree, making space for enterprise, diversity, and compassion to flourish in our city-state.

This piece was first published on Ravi Philemon's [Facebook page](#) and reproduced with permission. Philemon is a former Chief Editor of TOC and is currently the Secretary-General of Red Dot United.