

## **Should foreign activists fund S'pore civil groups?**

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This issue cropped up after a Swedish human rights activist met a former nominated member of parliament (NMP).

It set netizens talking.

Allegations flew online that the Swede may have offered funding, a claim both men denied. Eventually, ex-NMP Siew Kum Hong made a police report.

### **Why the online fuss?**

Local political parties are banned from receiving foreign donations, but civil society organisations (CSOs) are not. (See report, top of facing page.)

The NMP is not a member of any political party.

So, should CSOs be considered political entities and be subject to the same rules, as some actively work to influence policies?

Civil activists here say CSOs struggle to find local funding and so may have to consider foreign donors.

However, they agree that CSOs also need to be transparent about their source of funding and be savvy enough to question the agenda of the donors.

So what was the agenda of the Swedish activist, Mr Johan Skarendal?

He is a member of the Swedish International Liberal Centre (Silc), whose avowed goal, as stated on its website, is 'to strengthen organisations and support individuals who develop and promote democracy and human rights'.

Mr Skarendal, 29, is in charge of Silc activities in Singapore and the group is affiliated to the Liberal Party, one of the four political parties in the Swedish government since 2006.

The group has extensive reach globally and funds activities which promote its goals.

However, in May, Mr Skarendal denied he was on a funding trip here. He described his visit in April as 'fact-finding'. He declined comment for this report.

He said then: 'I wanted to learn about how prominent Singaporeans involved in civil society viewed the human rights issues in Singapore.'

Former NMP Braema Mathi said it would be good for civil society organisations and non-government organisations (NGOs) to be savvy enough to see the strings attached before deciding to take the cash.

Ms Mathi is the chairman of a local human rights organisation called Maruah (Malay for dignity). Members of Maruah were approached by Mr Skarendal too.

Ms Mathi said not all local groups may be savvy enough.

'You have every right to reject the donor. Yes, there can be conditions, but you also have to look around and see if you are keen on those conditions,' she said.

'If those conditions don't align with what you do, then you have to reject the donor.'

She pointed out that she once declined a partnership with a local group when she found out the funds came with a religious agenda.

The key thing is to be transparent about the funds, said Ms Mathi.

The rules for foreign funding of local political parties here are clear. The Political Donations Act bans political parties and organisations from receiving foreign donations.

But could foreign groups influence politics through non-political donations using civil societies as a front?

After all, NGOs have shown they can spark change here.

Said Dr Gillian Koh, a public policy expert at the Institute of Policy Studies: 'Civil society is very much part of the political landscape in Singapore, as it is elsewhere.'

She raised the examples of the Nature Society's robust and ultimately successful campaign to save Pulau Ubin's Chek Jawa and Unifem's advocacy for tougher laws against sex crimes against children.

But she pointed that the potential influence of overseas groups on groups here may be overplayed.

'They may be inspired by certain ideals, but it's not as though they are so easily swayed by foreigners - as if our civil society is ready to be colonised by civil society somewhere else,' she said.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan said no CSO would be breaking the law by virtue of receiving foreign funding as long as they are not recognised as a political organisation.

### **Duty to reveal**

But he said they have an 'ethical duty' to say who funds them so people who give donations can make an informed opinion about the group's motives.

He said there are many groups coming from the West that promote so-called democratic agendas, that may be at odds with the local context.

Mr Skarendal's Silc, for example, has a declared liberal democratic focus.

'It doesn't mean that just because (a CSO) receives foreign funding, it would do the funding agency's bidding,' Prof Tan said.

He added: 'But with perceptions, you cannot blame people if they were to take the view that this group is supporting a particular cause partly or doing something because of the foreign funder. 'It doesn't matter if it's foreign or local, but when it comes to foreign sources of funding, that would raise a potential red flag, because a foreign funding agency may have motives that may not go well with local interests.'

Ms Mathi said finding funds is tough for an advocacy-based group like hers (as opposed to a direct-service volunteer welfare organisation like a charity).

While in other countries, an advocacy group can survive purely working on research and advocacy, it's hard here, she said.

Local groups including foundations, tend to be wary of supporting advocacy groups since these groups are primarily asking for change - often change to government's policies, she said.

The potential donors see it as a risky investment because they may not know how far a CSO will push the line, and it may return to haunt the donor.

She also pointed out that international organisations and foundations find it hard to build a case to give aid to a CSO in Singapore, as they see us as a developed country.

One group currently looking for funds is socio-political blog The Online Citizen, which put up a page asking for donations on 13 Jul. TOC managing editor Andrew Loh declined to comment.

Gay rights activist Alex Au, who is also a member of Maruah, however, didn't think there was any issue with foreign funding.

'Politics in a global world is globalised. To some extent, Singapore politics cannot be totally restricted to Singaporeans - that's a fact of life,' he said.

In this interconnected world, Mr Au said that human beings have responsibility for other human beings.

But he agreed that funding sources should be as open as possible.

'Any organisation that takes a public profile should act in a way that is in the interest of accountability, to a reasonable extent,' he said.

### **Who did Swedish activist meet here?**

In about a one-week period in April, Swedish activist Johan Skarendal met an array of Singapore liberals.

They include filmmakers Martyn See and Seelan Palay, Myanmar activist Myo Myint Maung, and Mr Andrew Loh and Mr Choo Zheng Xi of socio-political blog The Online Citizen.

Others included activist Alex Au from gay movement People Like Us and lawyer Peter Low.

They are all active members of civil society.

Mr See said he met Mr Skarendal over drinks in town in a casual setting and the topic was mainly his experience with the Films Act.

The Act bans party-political films and films considered to be against the public interest. Mr See has had two of his films banned, one on Singapore Democratic Party chief Chee Soon Juan and the other, a documentary on former political detainee Said Zahari.

'I got the sense he was trying to write a book or something,' he said.

He said he meets representatives of foreign organisations 'all the time' and although it's fine to exchange information, he would reject foreign funding for his films.

Overseas Burmese Patriots spokesman Myo Myint Maung said he was introduced to MrSkarendal by Mr Palay, and there were five Myanmar activists at the meeting, himself included.

They spoke about their activities here.

'I think they would like to find out a way to help and to give some support of any kind that they could, for the cause of Burma, democracy and human life in Burma,' he said.

Funding didn't come up since his group's activities are self-supporting, he said.

He added: 'I don't think he's providing foreign funding to Singaporeans, but more like workshops, moral and technological support - that kind of thing.'

Gay rights activist Mr Au said they spoke about social change and politics here.

'He asked us a number of questions, and we answered,' he said.

Lawyer Mr Low said he met Mr Skarendel with NMP Siew Kum Hong and MrLeong Sze Hian, president of the Society of Financial Service Professionals. He said there are always people coming to Singapore and asking about what's happening.

'Foreign observers, they don't just ask ministers and members of the establishment, but also people who are perceived as anti-establishment,' he said.

But The New Paper understands MrSkarendal did not meet any minister or 'members of the establishment'.

Mr Low is the lawyer representing the Far Eastern Economic Review in the ongoing defamation suits brought against the journal by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

He added that foreign NGOs funding people to attend training courses or conferences or seminars overseas is common.

He himself travelled to Strasbourg, France, for an Asia-Europe Foundation (Asef) conference a few months ago when his airfare and accommodation were sponsored.

The Singapore Government is one of Asef's financial contributors.

### **Fact-finding**

Activist Mr Palay, who was present at several of the meetings, would say only that Mr Skarendal came on a fact-finding mission. Mr Palay had held a one-man protest outside the Malaysian High Commission in January last year.

He was involved in an attempt to stage a protest during the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meeting here in 2006.

All those interviewed denied being offered funds by Mr Skarendal, who is not new to Singapore. A self-described good friend of opposition politician Chee Soon Juan, Mr Skarendal has been involved with the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) chief's work in human rights and the promotion of liberal democracies.

Just how close is the relationship and has Mr Skarendal funded Mr Chee's non-political agenda? The Swede would not say. Ignoring the question, he merely replied earlier that he considered Mr Chee a good friend and someone who had written a testimonial for his studies in Taiwan. Their relationship goes back to 2003. After Mr Chee visited Sweden in February that year, the SDP's youth wing organised a conference here in July.

Swedish politicians were among the guests. Mr Skarendal helped to distribute literature and also gave a lecture.

Mr Chee also spoke at the conference, which was sponsored by Swedish-based institutions including SILC.

It was co-organised with the Sweden-Singapore Initiative for Democracy (SSID).

On SDP's website, the party says it is affiliated or working in close cooperation with several organisations including SSID, which is also funded by SILC.

### **Rules on raising funds**

A Ministry Of Home Affairs spokesman said:

'The Registry of Societies does not generally regulate the source of funds of societies.

'Societies should make provision for this in their own constitutions and comply with their own internal controls.

'However, societies must ensure that their funding is from legal sources and that applicable laws regulating funding are complied with.

'Societies that have been gazetted as political associations under the Political Donations Act or are registered charities with Charities Unit (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports) are subject to the respective regulatory requirements.

'If societies wish to raise funds from the public, they need to seek a fund-raising permit from either Charities Unit or Police Licensing Unit, depending on the nature of the fund-raising event.'