

A room full of “trouble makers”, unclear about the future?

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“Where is civil society today? I don’t have a very clear answer,” said Braema Mathi from human rights group MARUAH, as the Civil Society Conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies drew to a close.

Braema’s remarks might have puzzled some. It was, all in, a robust session that flagged out many issues that civil society faced in the past two years, if not the past 15, which were all good learning points for the way forward.

The conference also identified many positive developments in the relationship between groups and the government, and these views came from no less than the Nature Society of Singapore and ACRES, both of which made international news for their campaign efforts here. Surely there is much to cheer about?

Yet, Braema was not the only one. Sharon Siddique, Visiting Professorial Fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, SUTD, alluded to something similar: “I seem to be missing something here. Singapore civil society seems to be a bunch of happy campers, we solve issues, we work well with the government... Are we carving out such a unique peaceful environment that we do not have to worry about conflict?”

If we were to make any deduction from these views, it would be that civil society has indeed succeeded much in their quest for an ideal Singapore. They faced obstacles, and they overcame. Credit goes to their perseverance, dedication and appetite for risk.

Not, however, to the environment in which they work, which is often fraught with scepticism, suspicion and at times, outright resistance.

Much of this resistance, unfortunately, came from the government – the same government that has unwavering power over the survivability of civil society group, the same government that is perhaps only now realising that civil society groups, even the more controversial ones, can actually do good for Singapore.

The public narrative in at least the last decade has been to cast civil activities negatively – anti-progress, anti-social, too fringe to be of relevance to the Singapore story. Until recently, it was not surprising to find media reports of protests at Speakers’ Corner, if any, laced with dismissive tones.

And while we have matured in our perceptions towards civil society, we can still see remnants of that negativity. We saw that in the public disagreement between the government and the Bukit Brown campaigners. We saw the government take an initially elusive policy position with the FreeMyInternet group. We saw the media trying their best to discredit the protests against the Population White Paper, even if only to call out the fashion sense of its protesters.

No doubt, we also saw concessionary approaches, such as towards animal rights, a campaign I will always support. It is also no longer possible for sceptics to deny that Yong Vui Kong lives today because of the unwavering efforts by anti-death penalty groups to lobby the Singapore government. These were important developments and mark significant steps towards a more gracious society.

But does it signal a significant and consistent change in how the Singapore government approaches civil society as a whole?

Indeed, the current wave of support that civil society is receiving from the government seems more arbitrary than consistent. Such lack of consistency is a reflection of the government's attitude, and does little to inspire confidence among activists.

Take for instance animal rights groups, who now seem to be riding on a high of government favourability. Law Minister K Shanmugam has cautioned during the conference that "there are a lot of people who do nothing to do with animals, who feel that each time we do something here, that somehow impacts on their safety."

Conversely, the Bukit Brown campaigners have been met with resistance the past year, until the heritage site was recently listed on the World Monuments Fund watch list. Whereupon we see an almost u-turn in the government's approach, with the National Heritage Board now eager to work with the campaigners.

Such uncertainty and lack of clarity is precisely the problem. The implication is that the rules of engagement are not for civil society to set (not that groups would ask for that), but that the government can choose at its discretion on what to focus on. The pendulum can swing in the opposite direction at any time.

The survivability and growth of a civil society group hinges heavily on how the government perceives and sanctions its activities. Unfortunately, this evaluation is not based on legal boundaries, universal standards or whether a group has valid concerns.

Rather, it seems to be based on whether and how the group supports the government's objectives and initiatives. As the Law Minister seemed to suggest, these objectives are wrapped around the twin pillars of economic progress and deterrence of social conflicts, neither which makes sense to groups championing causes of intrinsic value, or groups not part of the state's social welfare apparatus.

No, civil society should not ask the government to hand everything to them on a silver platter, nor request for its explicit endorsement. We need to continue the engagement process, and keep chipping away at the causes we believe in. But when the rules of engagement are unclear and the value of causes evaluated at the sole discretion of the government, then the basis of fairness and social progress goes out the window.

Indeed, Prof Cherian George from the Nanyang Technological University might not be wrong when he summarised this observation by civil society members: "Where the rubber hits the

road... activists still find government officials who are grudging in their consultation, who may find it easier to dismiss the trouble makers in front of them.”

If civil society is to progress, we need to seriously ask: What is the default response of the government towards any form of open and direct challenge to their core beliefs in governance?

If the government gets to pick and choose its battles, then we are poorer as a society. Because not everything can be measured by an economic value, not all civil action that smells of politics will tear our delicate social fabric apart, not all vociferous voices belong to enemies of the state.

If there can be one take-away for our government from this conference, it should be that we have a diverse, dedicated and directed civil society, and all groups within are worthy of fair and respectful consideration, even if we might not agree today about what the future Singapore should be.