

Singapore civil society evolved and generally positive Academics and activists agree on progress, but more focus needed on fundamental issues, says Law Minister

Howard Lee

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Civil society has progressed much in Singapore, with greater diversity of interests and willingness among groups to voice out their ideals.

This was the main message shared by speakers and participants at the Civil Society Conference yesterday organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, the first in 15 years since such a session was held.

References were made to the comments by former Minister George Yeo, who at the first conference lamented that Singapore's civil society landscape risked being like a banyan tree, where the shade offered by the state denies the growth of anything else beneath it.

Contrasting Yeo's views to the situation today, participants were of the view that the government has grown more willing to engage civil society members and give space for them to grow.

Prof Walter Woon, Deputy Chairman of the Centre for International Law at the National University of Singapore, opined that there are more among the current generation of Ministers and top civil servants who have "a greater sense of fairness", even if they cannot give in to everyone's wishes.

The ideal of a fair society is also what most civil society groups are advocating.

Faizah Jamal, Nominated Member of Parliament and nature advocate, also believed that it was through continued engagement with the government, speaking in a language that they are familiar with, that civil society has progressed in their causes over the years.

But speakers were also wary that this willingness to engage the government does not degenerate into the destruction of the common good for the nation.

Prof Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, cautioned that "democracies can become dysfunctional when civil society goes on a rampage", when "civil society becomes uncivil society". Prof Kishore did not cite any specific local examples.

Nevertheless, civil society advocates believed that continual dialogue, and faith in the civil service's willingness to listen, is the best way to keep civil society relevant and engaged.

Alvin Tan, Artistic Director of The Necessary Stage listed many examples where he was able to find workable solutions with government authorities, despite the sensitivities of artistic creativity.

Advocates also deliberated on Tan's outline of conflict between the extreme positions of the dominant – meaning the state – and the oppositional, and how those who can give-and-take with the authorities are seen as “selling out” the cause.

But advocates present suggested that the work of civil society is a slow evolutionary process that takes time to reach maturity, and give-and-take is a necessary part of that process.

Law Minister K Shanmugam was present at the last session of the conference, and took questions about what the government is doing to assist civil society.

The Minister insisted that, despite concerns by activists, by and large, the government works well with civil society, but not every positive engagement is sexy enough to hit the newspapers. Many activities led by civil society, such as for the disadvantaged in society, receive funding from the government.

He also expressed concern that there is currently “too much naval gazing” among Singaporeans, instead of looking at more fundamental issues, such as our ageing population.

The Minister also reiterated that the government's role is essentially to move the country forward economically, without which society will regress.

About 250 attended the conference, including members of civil society, academia and government officials.