

'More rules' needed as interest groups jostle for public space; Society must accept compromise, learn to disagree without being disagreeable, says former AGC Walter Woon

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With more interest groups jostling for public space and a citizenry more inclined to challenge the Government, society will need "more rules, not fewer", said former Attorney-General Walter Woon yesterday.

"You cannot expect, when you live with 7,400 people in the same kilometre, to have your way all the time. You must accept compromise, you must accept that, even if they (other people) do not agree with you, there has to be a form of adjudication ... uphold that rule of law ... learn to disagree without being disagreeable."

Speaking in his personal capacity at a session of the Institute of Policy Studies' Conference on Civil Society at the Grand Copthorne Waterfront Hotel yesterday, Professor Woon, who is a National University of Singapore law professor, cited four factors that will lead to greater interaction between the various interest groups and the Government, as well as among the groups themselves.

He pointed out that with 7,405 people per square kilometre, Singapore is "the most crowded society in human history" with no "pressure-release valve", which other countries with a countryside possess.

The population density is expected to increase to 10,000 people per square kilometre by 2030, the former Nominated Member of Parliament added.

Secondly, it will be "inevitable" that "different interest groups will increasingly find themselves in competition for public space, in opposition to Government, in opposition, in fact, to other interest groups".

Technology, meanwhile, also facilitates the creation of interest groups, he told the conference. "The existence of the Internet allows the lone wolf to join the pack. And the pack then also (fights) for that public space."

Fourthly, as a result of rising education levels, people will "have a perspective that there are things that can be done better", Prof Woon said.

In the past, he noted, the Government's approach to clashes with interest groups had been to wield "the iron hand in iron glove", and to say "we will make the decisions".

However, it can no longer do this, as "it is quite clear that the electorate is now willing to vote against the Government".

Prof Woon noted that, anecdotally, there have been more challenges to the Government in the courts within the last five years than in the past 30 to 40 years, such as the two constitutional challenges to Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises sex between males.

Speaking at a dialogue session later, Law Minister K Shanmugam said the Government has to work with civil society. He described the relationship between the two sides as one that is “by and large ... working quite well”.

However, Mr Shanmugam acknowledged that not every engagement between civil servants and civil society results in a positive experience, adding that “there are areas where, maybe, agencies have been less than forthcoming”.

“My own belief is that civil servants believe, like us, in engagement, but when the rubber hits the road in terms of specific proposals, in terms of specific meetings, in terms of specific agencies, there can be a difference in perception and one can be wrong ... both sides can be wrong,” he said.

Citing the Government’s work with animal welfare groups as an example, Mr Shanmugam said Singapore cannot be governed without the active participation of people and civil society in today’s modern and complex economic and civil situation.

He said: “If you ask (the animal welfare groups) today, look at what was accomplished in the last two years. At their suggestion, the government formed the animal welfare law reform group — they came up with fairly revolutionary set of suggestions, very, very substantive suggestions. The government accepted all of them this year.”