

The Art of Advocacy in Singapore

edited by

CONSTANCE SINGAM &
MARGARET THOMAS



This book is dedicated to all civil society activists, past, present, and future. You are the seekers of a more just and compassionate world. Your words and action sow the seeds of a better future. Your courage and commitment give us hope. You inspire us to keep working for the changes we want to see.

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When ordinary people do extraordinary things

By Constance Singam

“A change is brought about because ordinary people do extraordinary things”.

Barack Obama (2008)

A prominent activist of the 1950s began an open letter to the Singapore Chief Minister with a reference to the turmoil in government caused by what she called ‘immature statesmanship’. That was hardly likely to appeal to the Chief Minister’s better nature. Indeed, in the Singapore of today such words might well trigger the threat of a defamation suit. But the politicians of that time were of a different nature, more respectful of opposing views and less sensitive to criticism.

The activist was Shirin Fozdar, the driving force behind the Singapore Council of Women (SCW). Formed in 1952 to campaign for better laws to protect women and children, such as a ban on polygamy, SCW’s advocacy was brilliantly strategized and effectively managed. Their activism helped to bring about the passing in 1961 of the Women’s Charter, the most progressive piece of legislation anywhere in the world at that time. It revolutionised the socio-economic and legal status of women and families in Singapore for the better.

Fozdar and her husband came to Singapore from India in 1950. Shocked at how common polygamy was in Singapore, and how badly women were treated, she got together some of the most prominent women and the SCW was formed. Her experience in the Indian Nationalist movement made her a natural leader to drive the campaign against

polygamy and other practices detrimental to women.

She was a spirited campaigner. In her open letter, in July 1955, to David Marshall, the then chief minister of Singapore, she warned: “The attainment of independence will remain an idle dream if men in this country do not rise to generous heights to grant that independence to their own kith and kin -- the women of this country. The men here have not reckoned with an unknown entity called God. He dislikes unjust people, and woe betide a country or a people who act contrary to His Will which demands that ‘You do unto others as you would have others do to you.’”

SCW’s activism was set against a backdrop of a vibrant civil society in the throes of an anti-colonial nationalist movement from which emerged many political parties including the People’s Action Party (PAP). The women’s movement was able to forge ahead even as the British colonial authorities and the PAP government, once it had established itself as the dominant power, were clamping down on activism. Eschewing democratic principles and emphasising security and economic development, the government made liberal use of the Internal Security Act (ISA) to intern those who opposed their authority. The women’s movement of the 1950s, though astonishingly radical and assertive, posed no threat to the political power and authority of the state. In fact, what they were calling for could enhance the government’s standing by improving the lives of citizens.

When women’s votes mattered

A confluence of factors contributed to the success of SCW’s advocacy. First, the campaign was organised by a coalition of women and women’s organisations who lobbied all political parties intensely. Second, they had the support of a free media, which helped raise awareness. Third, the existence within the PAP of a Women’s Wing that was dominated by the more politicised Chinese-educated women, under the leadership of Chan Choy Siong, were powerful advocates of women’s rights. They could not be ignored nor denied at a time when all political parties and particularly the PAP were jostling for support from the electorate.

Women’s votes mattered then. The PAP adopted in its election

manifesto the slogan 'one man, one wife' as part of its commitment to a policy of equal rights and opportunities for women. On 24 May 1961 the Legislative Assembly passed the Women's Charter Bill bringing to a climax the fight for women's rights that began in the 1950s. In 1962, during another intensely contested election, the PAP government instituted the principle of equal pay for equal work.

As it consolidated its power in the 1960s, the PAP government shifted its focus to political stability and economic development. Economic success, it was argued, could only be achieved with political stability. This stability was brought about with the defeat of the opposition in 1968, the control of the political process, and the suppression of civil society activism. The PAP established a structure of overwhelming control. An apt analogy is that of an octopus: The PAP leadership is the brain and body of accumulated power, while the bureaucracy and institutions of the party machine provide the tentacles, which extend to various institutions and agencies of control. The cumulative effect of this structure would transform the political, social and psychological landscape of Singapore over a period of 20 years.

With remarkable efficiency the government silenced all the activist groups. The only one left standing was the Malayan Nature Society, one of Singapore's oldest NGOs, sustained during the wilderness years through grassroots activities. With the success of the campaign to end polygamy and the passing into law of the Women's Charter, SCW's main role for its existence was fulfilled. Its membership and activities dwindled and it dissolved in 1971. Within the PAP, the role of women receded. When Chan Choy Siong retired from politics in 1970, the PAP had no women amongst its members of parliament. It fielded no women candidates in the 1972 general election. Parliament would remain an all-male place until 1984, when the PAP finally fielded three women, all of whom were elected.

A new wave of women activists

In 1985, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), the organisation that I have been most involved with, was founded. Indignation at the government's very intrusive eugenic policies aimed at

raising the falling fertility rate sparked the women to mobilise themselves and to form the association. These policies were directed specifically at improving the birth rate of middle class educated women while disincentives were aggressively directed at the less-educated women. Indignation transformed into courage to overcome fear and paralysis and then into action. AWARE set out to challenge public policies and transform the values of society and public opinion. But unlike SCW's 1950s campaign against polygamy, the political climate of the 1980s called for a more nuanced approach. Despite the hostile political climate, AWARE's advocacy work, bolstered by research, was vocal and assertive.

The feminist discourse, as a body of knowledge and as a political force, offered me and other AWARE members a basis for challenging the authority of a government which is both patriarchal and paternalistic. Our political and cultural environment, where the State uses the power of the law when it feels challenged and its policies are questioned, calls for action that is low-keyed and circumspect. It is not so much a question of overturning a system as it is of trying it to move in the desired direction.

Civil society and advocacy

The tactics Shirin Fozdar and the SCW brilliantly pioneered in Singapore can be found codified, some 20 years later, in the book *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* by Saul David Alinsky. Alinsky was an American community organiser and writer who is widely considered to be the founder of modern community organising. SCW's methods, and the successful tactics of continuing generations of activists, yield surprisingly well to analysis and elucidation of some of Alinsky's rules. Consider these of his rules:

- Make the enemy live up to its own book of rules. You can kill them with this, for they can no more obey their own rules than the Christian church can live up to Christianity.
- Ridicule [humour] is man's most potent weapon. It is almost impossible to counteract ridicule. Also, it infuriates the opposition, which then reacts to your advantage.
- A good tactic is one your people enjoy.

- A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag. Man can sustain militant interest in any issue for only a limited time....
- Keep the pressure on, with different tactics and actions, and utilise all events of the period for your purpose.
- The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself.
- The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative.

He further offers:

“An organiser must stir up dissatisfaction and discontent... He must create a mechanism that can drain off the underlying guilt for having accepted the previous situation for so long a time. Out of this mechanism, a new community organisation arises.... The job then is getting the people to move, to act, to participate; in short, to develop and harness the necessary power to effectively conflict with the prevailing patterns and change them.”

These rules, summed up easily in this phrase “...to develop and harness the necessary power...” are the principles that underlie our advocacy. A problem in Singapore, where civil society resides in a very complex and difficult environment, is that the concept and the roles of civil society and advocacy are often not clearly understood.

What is civil society

I am often asked “what is civil society?”. My answer is that it is a ‘virtual’ space but it is easier to identify it in networks of citizens getting together to try to solve problems in the community and to pursue common interests. Civil society is a grassroots endeavour and as such provides space outside the state institutions and through which artistic, spiritual, cultural, ethnic, occupational, social and recreational sentiments find expression.

Clan associations, social clubs, book clubs, places of worship, professional associations, and women’s organisations are examples of such forums. The important attributes contributing to the success of civil society activism rest on the ability to build autonomous communications, power relations, and horizontal relationships of trust and reciprocity. These activities enrich the life of the community and contribute to its social and cultural vitality.

Civil society activism has three goals. First, it is to identify, articulate and advocate for those intangible values that make for a more democratic and caring society – the caring society that Singapore lost sight of in its pursuit of economic success. Second, in a state with a one-party government, civil society advocacy plays an important role in coming up with alternative ideas and challenging policies that are detrimental to the well-being of the community. Third, activism tests the boundaries of permissible open debates and helps to forge a middle ground, a safe space amidst the minefield of regulations and restrictions that is Singapore.

It is not an easy task. The state does not hesitate to crack down with all the laws available to it even if it is only to demonstrate its power and control. One such demonstration, known as Operation Spectrum, was in 1987 when 22 people were detained under the ISA for supposedly plotting to overthrow the government and to set up a Marxist state.

One of those detained, Teo Soh Lung, had this to say in the book *1987: Singapore's Marxist Conspiracy 30 years on*: "Operation Spectrum was a clumsy but successful attack on a re-emerging civil society. It was a multi-pronged attack that wiped out student activism, destroyed or crippled several legitimate organisations". These organisations included The Law Society and the Catholic Church.

Labels such as 'Marxist', 'feminist', and 'radical' are used as "terms of abuse which have no meaning", said American philosopher, writer and activist Noam Chomsky. In his 1992 book *Chronicles of Dissent*, Chomsky said: "There is a whole array of terms of abuse which are used to protect ourselves from understanding of the world in which we live".

Challenge is possible: Change is possible

The experiences of organisations such as AWARE and Nature Society narrated in this volume are very illuminating and demonstrate clearly that it is possible to challenge traditional and entrenched public attitudes. AWARE devised a variety of creative strategies to assert their interests and to achieve specific goals without overt expressions of hostility. Campaigns such as SCWO-AWARE's 'Violence against Women', TWC2's 'Sundays Off' for domestic workers, and Nature Society's Kranji marshes

conservation project offer positive models of interaction and negotiation between NGOs and government agencies.

The campaigns raised the awareness of the public to the importance of the issues, and the public support strengthened the NGOs. They feed off each other. The deeper the research and the stronger the arguments, the more convinced the public becomes of the need for action. The greater the public support, the greater becomes the influence of the NGOs. This in turn makes possible the creation of a supportive environment and a network of organisations and individuals for collective agency to express desires and ideals. But, it must be said, it is often a slow and determined journey.

Activism and advocacy work have benefits for the individual activist too. It offers her an affirmation of self that comes from working with others in a group, and from the collective and enthusiastic exploration of new ideas. It empowers her and instils passion, energy and courage to risk the public expression of different and opposing views, to build social trust, and to expand her network of fellow activists. The egalitarian structures and practices of NGOs offer those involved a sense of personal commitment and involvement. Such an environment builds trust.

Trust, between the State and citizens, between NGOs and the state, and between activists, is essential for our social well-being. Without it we retreat into bureaucracy, rules and restrictions. Political scientist Robert D Putnam, who is Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, in his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), makes the point that the community groups, workplaces and organisations that are authoritarian and paternalistic do not create civic virtues. They distribute favours to the chosen and compliant, or demand blind loyalty. The consequences are competitive and suspicious interactions. This, sadly, is Singapore's current reality.

Mutual trust and mutual respect create citizenship. An excess of control, whether in personal relationships, in the family or in the public sphere, erodes the human spirit and its will to act independently and creatively. Alexis de Tocqueville, an early observer of democracy and the role of civil society, in his first book *Democracy in America* (1838)

wrote that the state – with its seductive promise of security and material well-being– was the real enemy of civil society. For Tocqueville, it would be fatal for “the government ... to take the place of associations...” He added: “Sentiments and ideas renew themselves, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal action of men upon one another.”

The most important lesson I have learnt from my own civil society activism is the great potential we have for enhancing our own secular interests as well as enhancing the quality of the wider civil society participation. Initiatives such as the ‘Apa Itu Activist’ forums, and the ‘Don’t kena contempt’ campaign against the passage of the Administration of Justice (Protection) Bill, are signs of a growing civil society space. A space where citizens can observe and practise free assembly and robust dialogue, where they can associate without fear. This will bring people out from their private affairs into public projects where they learn, as Robert Hefner said in his discussion of *Civil Society: Cultural Possibility of a Modern Ideal*, the “habits of the heart conducive to a sense of civil good”.

Not all civil society activists share a common ‘sense of civil good’ and how to achieve it. The life of an activist, as French philosopher and social theorist Michael Foucault has warned, is one of a ‘constant tension’ and ‘perpetual battle’. Ignorance of processes, of civil society values, and suspicion of each other’s agenda and intentions, ideological differences, and fear of the government create tensions and cripple civil society and projects intended to achieve greater good for Singaporeans. Even as there are encouraging signs of a growing civil society space, the government continues to circumscribe civil society activism by more subtle and sophisticated means at the grass root level with administrative restrictions and annoyances, police harassment, financial penalties, and intimidation of individuals.

The civil society struggle is, as Foucault says, “a network of relations, constantly in tension ... a perpetual battle rather than ... the conquest of a territory”. And so we march on, trying to win the minds and hearts of both the makers of policy and members of the public as we strengthen our research and analysis, sharpen our arguments, shape our strategies

and try out different tactics. In this book, you will find many inspiring stories of the struggle, of ordinary people doing extraordinary things. People driven by passion, by belief in their cause, by a deep desire to see justice and equity for all, and to right the wrongs that still exist in our society. They offer their experiences and the lessons learnt as they practise the delicate art of advocacy in Singapore.

Constance Singam is an author and civil society activist. She took a degree in English Literature in her forties, and a Master's degree in her sixties. In the last 30 years, Constance has led women's organisations, co-founded civil society groups, been a columnist in several national publications, and contributed to and co-edited several books. Her works include "A History of the TWC: Building Social Space in Singapore", "Re-Presenting Singapore Women" which she co-edited, and two memoirs "Where I was: A Memoir from the Margins" (2013) and "Never Leave Home without Your Chilli Sauce" (2016).