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Editor's Introduction: It Is Time to Trim the Banyan Tree

Constance Singam

WHAT IS THE STATE of civil society today?

The achievements in transformative changes that we have experienced in our society have occurred through civil society activism. These were won through patience, hard work and resilience and their success is illustrated by our history in the 1950/1960s, the campaigns mounted by the Singapore Council of Women to end polygamy and which resulted in the Women's Charter of 1961, by AWARE through the 1980s and '90s with their activism in calling for the legal protection of women against domestic violence, and finally the successful challenge by the gay community and campaigns by Pink Dot to repeal 337A. More recently activism has drawn attention to issues of poverty, class, race/ethnicity, the environment and gender, the advocacy about which were often suppressed by the State. Yes, we do have an oppressive hegemonic government. Activists have been arrested and taken to court; activists have been jailed; activists have been fined; activists have had to leave the country to exercise their rights to freedom of expression; activists fear for their jobs. That too is part of our history.

In spite of this intimidating political culture, civil society is attracting a new generation of activists, highly educated, well-informed, and social media-savvy, and who are learning to creatively negotiate the various obstacles in their way. Activists are becoming bolder and more imaginative. They believe, as their predecessors did, that civil society provides alternative visions for our

future which takes into account the humanity of our people, the values related to human rights, environmental conservation and social justice.

What does this new generation of activists augur for civil society in Singapore, and for Singapore?

This book offers some answers. The writers, such as SG Climate Rally, CAPE and activists like Kirsten, Irie and Reetaza, these new kids on the block may represent organisations and initiatives that seem fluid in structure and provisional in terms of memberships. But all the writers featured in this collection explore aspects of contemporary civil society in the context of our political culture. Their chapters provide rich material for reflection on the mechanics of power, the nature and effects of ideology, and the meaning of civil society and activism.

Margaret Thomas and I have been activists and have witnessed the development of civil society for nearly 40 years. What is, for us, the meaning of civil society activism? At its core, activism is the desire to make the world a better place. It is the belief that the world can be a better place, and that each of us can and should have a hand in the effort. The work of our early activists and global feminism and their creed that the ‘personal is political’ as they engaged in fundamental social change continue to be a source of inspiration.

So we speak up, and often we get to know like-minded people and we join, or we start, organisations that work to bring about the changes we think are needed. The work done by these non-governmental organisations, or NGOs, ranges from providing direct services on the ground to carrying out research and campaigns to influence policymaking and to change mindsets.

Cherian George once described civil society as “a network of roads travelled on by a multiplicity of vehicles”. Which is a good way of looking at it. Some of those vehicles are driven by NGOs, others by individuals working within their

own spheres of influence. This is especially the case with the academics who have contributed to this book.

Cherian, for example, does it with his writing, which he says are “tools for the public exercise of reason”. Walid Jumblatt has his ‘Teh Tarik’ podcast where he tries to normalise discussion about politics. Ng Kok Hoe raises awareness of taboo subjects like homelessness with his research. Kenneth Paul Tan tries to link his academic work with the social and political life beyond academia.

But throughout our independent history, civil society has been overshadowed by the Singapore of economic enterprise; the Singapore of many laws and rules; the rich, clean, safe, authoritarian Singapore.

The taming of civil society

There was a time when political parties were part of the vibrant civil society we had after the 2nd World War, a period of nationalist fervour and struggle for independence. But the party that in 1959 won the mandate to run the country soon started to alienate itself from the civil society that gave birth to it.

Once in power, the People’s Action Party began to systematically and efficiently tame civil society as it embarked on its massive social and economic programmes. The unions, the media, students, opposition politicians—all the elements that might have been a source of dissent and disruption were brought under control in the effort to build the disciplined workforce and conducive business climate that would attract foreign investment and create jobs.

Two major events, one in the 1960s and the other in the 1980s, had chilling effects on civil society. In both cases, the government clamped down on activists by using the Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows for detention without trial.

On February 2, 1963, more than 100 people were arrested in an exercise called 'Operation Coldstore'. Those arrested included 24 members of opposition party Barisan Sosialis; 50 executives of 13 trade unions; five left-wing journalists; and 11 Nanyang University students. They were accused of being communist sympathisers involved in subversive activities.

By the 1970s, activism and activists had all but disappeared. The economy was booming, jobs were a-plenty, HDB estates were rapidly sprouting. People were focused on their work, building careers and growing their incomes in order to buy homes and cars and other such necessities of modern life.

In 1987, with more and more Singaporeans having happily embraced middle-class lifestyles, the government suddenly, and with unbelievable effrontery, once again raised the spectre of a threat to internal security. Operation Spectrum saw 22 young church and social workers arrested and detained under the ISA. They were accused of being Marxists plotting to overthrow the government.

It was a preposterous accusation. The 22 young people arrested were concerned about issues such as poverty and migrant worker welfare. It was shocking, and frightening, to discover that the government was prepared to use the ISA against innocent people.

I knew several of them personally and not knowing the real reason for the detentions, I could not sleep for days. For the first time I experienced what it was like to live in fear, wondering whether the government might cast its net wider to bring to heel those of us who were involved in the stirrings of a new wave of activism in Singapore.

The re-growth of civil society

In early 1986, I joined AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research) soon after it was launched. AWARE was the first feminist advocacy

organisation in Singapore. Its founding was triggered by the government's insistence on pushing through sexist and elitist policies based on very questionable eugenic premises. Grounding its advocacy on research and feminist principles, AWARE challenged the government's controversial and patriarchal family and population policies.

AWARE women's experience offers a Foucauldian view of power as a 'productive creative force' even as the state continues to have a monopoly of public space, limiting citizen's freedoms. This creative force generates knowledge, methods and techniques that allow individuals to maintain a sense of power and control over their life and activities. AWARE exercised this power and knowledge over the years to successfully lobby for important policy changes, such as improved laws and better policing processes to protect survivors of domestic violence and sexual harassment.

Most importantly, AWARE has been able to nudge the tightly controlled civil space towards a more open debate on women's issues. Corinna Lim in her chapter offers us a broad history of social movements in Singapore. These movements challenge existing value structures and policies and help to transform them to values related to human rights, environmental protection and conservation, and social justice.

Ng Kok Hoe in his chapter makes the point that social policy research grounded in facts and people's experiences can challenge the dominant policy narratives and alter them. This approach has most successfully been adopted by the Nature Society (Singapore) and the Heritage Society and, some decades earlier, by SPUR (Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group).

Much of the preservation of our natural landscape must be attributed to the hard work of the Nature Society. Their interaction with the government often proved to be difficult work and occasionally put the society on the wrong side of government planners, but they persisted, and the evidence of their work is

there in places such as the Chek Jawa Wetlands.

Another activist society concerned about government policy in relation to developmental plans is the Heritage Society. It was founded in 1987 as an independent voice for heritage conservation in Singapore at a time when heritage buildings such as the National Library, Tanjong Malam and the National Theatre were being swallowed up in the redevelopment plans.

SPUR was formed in 1965 by a group of architects, among them William Lim and Tay Kheng Soon. The 1960s were a time of massive urban development in Singapore. SPUR critically analysed and engaged with contemporary issues of urban development in Singapore. Their work was highly regarded, but the government was ambivalent at best. In 1975, the relationship became tense, and SPUR closed down. But some of the ideas that SPUR championed were later taken up by the government planners. These were the MRT system, the relocation of the airport to Changi, conservation of old buildings, and the Area Licensing Scheme—all now symbols of Singapore's developmental success.

As the longest-serving and most committed activists, the late William Lim and Tay Kheng Soon have earned a special place in our history. William Lim played an important role in civil society until his death in 2023. He hosted discussions, workshops and seminars; authored and edited many publications; and provided funding that empowered many activists, including this writer.

In his account of SPUR in the book *Building Social Space in Singapore* (Select Pub., 2002), Dinesh Naidu says: “The legacy of SPUR continues to the present day, as ideas that have gained currency and become implemented, as lessons of how difficult relations with state authorities can be, and even as a source of inspiration for a younger generation of participants in Singapore civil society.”

Censors and civil space

Authoritarian governments can only function effectively by silencing the media, which is civil society's major channel for expressing and disseminating information and views, and an engine for cultural change.

The Singapore government has been very efficient in taming the media. It began the process of reining in the influence of the media in 1963 during Operation Coldstore. Among those detained were journalists.

The early 1970s were difficult years for print media with the closure of the *Eastern Sun* and *The Singapore Herald* newspapers. Foreign publications were curtailed, and senior executives and the managing editor of a Chinese language paper were detained under the ISA. The final blow was the passage in Parliament in 1974 of the Newspaper and Printing Press Act which allowed the government to revoke printing licenses. The mainstream media increasingly came under the control and management of the government.

That was censorship at its most obvious. Censorship can take many forms. Citizens can be silenced with laws that make you think twice, and then again, about what you say and how you say it. State funding and other support can be withdrawn. Space for activities can be restricted and tightly controlled. Permits for performances can be denied or issued with strict conditions.

All these forms of state censorship are a constant struggle for artists. In his chapter, Alfian Sa'at provides a historical account of instances of state persecution of the arts community, and he outlines many strategies and approaches to resist attacks on the freedom of expression.

One instance of state censorship was in 1993/94 when The Necessary Stage was nearly closed down when they experimented with forum theatre. The government warned them that a forum theatre event could easily be hijacked by agitators. However, about a decade later, Drama Box was able to use this

form of theatre in its engagement with the community without a murmur from anyone in authority about potential agitators. The Necessary Stage was just a little too ahead of the times.

In 1990 a bold new space opened for the arts community. The Substation, the first independent arts centre, was hailed as a trailblazer in the indie arts scene. In 1985, the late and great Kuo Pao Kun—playwright, political detainee, theatre director, public intellectual, arts activist and Cultural Medallion awardee—mooted the idea of a home for the arts. It would, he said, be a place to nurture a wide variety of home-grown talent, from playwrights to visual artists: “I am concerned about creating a space for the arts in our value systems, lifestyle and consciousness. The Substation will be a permanent space to do arts, see arts, talk arts and live the arts.”

But in 2022 the National Arts Council took back the building in order to renovate it. It assured the management of The Substation that they could still use the building after the renovation, but they would only have part of it. The Substation would have to share the building with other arts groups. The Substation rejected that offer, and it now lacks space to function as it used to.

The problems faced by The Substation illustrate the complexities of functioning in civil society, says T. Sasitharan, public intellectual and arts activist who was one of the early pioneering directors of The Substation. In a conversation with the editors, which appears in this book as a chapter, Sasi offers an honest view of the difficulties confronting arts activism, and calls for a new approach to funding and the recognition of the value of the arts.

The mainstream media, as we have seen, came under the complete control of the government some time ago. Online media is now the object of the state’s attention, with laws passed in recent years to deal with fake news. An early online platform for news and views was Sintercom (Singapore Internet Community), set up in 1994 by Tan Chong Kee, who correctly predicted the

impact of technology as a powerful tool in enabling discussion and interaction.

But Sintercom was forced to close its activities in 2001 when it was required to register as a political site and comply with a code of practice. The guidelines about what could be published and what should not were so vague that Chong Kee decided to close Sintercom rather than fall into the trap of self-censorship. It was the beginning of the government’s control of the use of the internet.

When civil society comes together

In 1998 some activists got together to take a look at the state of Singapore’s civil society and to think of ways to build bridges of trust and communication between civil society groups and individual activists. It had been a decade since the shock of Operation Spectrum, and the chilling effect still lingered, with activists inclined to keep to themselves. We called ourselves TWC (The Working Committee) and we came up with a year-long programme of forums, seminars, a fair and a conference.

Sharing his experience of TWC, in *Building Social Space in Singapore*, Cherian George described TWC as an inclusive network for participants to get to know each other. The greater the number of participants who could engage each other as equals, he wrote, the greater the potential for uncovering new opportunities for cooperation and for learning how to build common ground.

In July 2002, another network was activated when a few friends and I, shocked by the death of a foreign domestic worker, decided we needed to do something about the welfare and rights of migrant workers.

Muawanatul Chasanah, a young Indonesian woman, died 16 months after she started working for a Singapore family. At the time of her death, she weighed just 36 kilograms, and she had some 200 injuries on her body. Her male employer had whipped, punched, kicked, scalded, and burnt her repeatedly.

No-one in the household came to her aid when he was abusing her. The doctors whom she would have seen regularly for the obligatory health checks either did not spot the evidence of this abuse or chose to ignore it.

Calling ourselves TWC2, we launched a year-long campaign to raise awareness of the plight and the rights of foreign domestic workers. We conducted research and ran campaigns, including one calling for foreign domestic workers to have a day off every week. In August 2004, TWC2, or Transient Workers Count Too, was registered as a society.

TWC2 continues to advocate for better work and living conditions for all migrant workers, and it also provides a range of services for them. Thanks to the efforts of TWC2 and others, domestic workers have since 2013 had the right to a weekly day of rest. Alex Au from TWC2 spoke to us about the continuing challenges faced by migrant workers, and makes the point that activists have to develop strategies to call out regulators and policymakers when we see something amiss.

In the 25 years since TWC, there have been other efforts to bring activists together and to build bridges of solidarity and friendship and a sense of community. ‘Apa Itu Activist?’, a forum on civil society action and advocacy organised by a loose group of activists, has been staged several times. And the Singapore Advocacy Awards was a three-year programme, launched in 2014 to acknowledge and award the achievements of activists and to raise awareness of their important work. This programme culminated in the book *The Art Of Advocacy in Singapore* (Ethos Books, 2017), which is being followed up by this volume.

Finally the year 2009 witnessed a powerful and moving demonstration of the strength of our civil society, which was perhaps the most iconic moment in the history of civil society. This became known as the AWARE Saga when a group of Christian women staged a takeover of our organisation at our annual

general meeting because they objected to AWARE’s values and programmes. From March to May that year the mainstream media reported the activities of AWARE, mobilising support for the ‘old guards’ of AWARE and its membership grew from 300 to 3,000 on the day of the EOGM. The support for us came from individuals across Singapore who objected strongly against the takeover of a secular organisation by a religious linked group of women. We won AWARE back at a heated extraordinary general meeting that saw many people passionately speaking from the floor in support of AWARE and for a secular society. It was our civil society’s finest hour, and it was inspiring.

Where are we today?

The civil society landscape in Singapore today is much changed from four decades ago when Margaret and I took our first tentative steps into advocacy. Activism then was almost a dirty word; today there are all manner of advocacy and activist organisations with more access to social media and the virtual internet communities which inform and support nascent activists. An increasing number of people yearn to be part of the policy decision making process that has an impact on the daily lives of Singaporeans and they challenge the notion that governments have the monopoly of ideas. On our campuses there are groups like CAPE, which aims to build political literacy and civic capacity. Some groups, like Transformative Justice Collective, tackle once almost taboo issues such as the death penalty.

Activism Singapore-style does not include protest marches down the streets. Our laws against public assembly and protests are so widely defined that just one person standing on the street holding up a smiley sign is considered an unlawful assembly. But since September 2000 we have been able to hold public protests and demonstrations—so long as these take place within the confines of Hong Lim Park, designated by the state as our Speakers’ Corner.

The first legal public outdoor demonstration was held at Hong Lim Park in 2008 to raise awareness of the plight of abused maids. Many other protests and demonstrations have since been held there, the most successful being the annual Pink Dot organised by LGBTQ activists to encourage support for inclusiveness, diversity and the freedom to love.

The first Pink Dot was held in 2009 and attracted just 2,500 or so people. Interest and support rapidly grew, and Pink Dot now attracts well over 20,000 participants. In their chapter, Rachel Yeo writes about Pink Dot and the tactics of survival and success. Fluidity and formlessness, she argues, are the most effective path to subversion, disruption and transformation for a more equal society. The Pink Dot strategy of slowly but steadily working to change attitudes offers lessons for other activists.

Civil society in Singapore is now at a crossroads. On the one hand we have the long-standing restrictive laws, like the Internal Security Act. In recent years we have seen a rash of new laws that can dampen the scope for expression and action. These include POFMA (The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act 2019) and FICA (the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act).

But on the other hand, policymakers have begun to refer to civil society in positive terms as a stakeholder in the business of nation building. At the opening of the 14th Parliament in April 2023, President Halimah Yacob called for members of a “passionate civil society” to advocate their visions of a better society. During the debate on her speech, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong acknowledged that “we must also have the courage to change where change is needed”.

The driving force to advance the role of civil society could very well be our recently elected President Tharman Shanmugaratnam who shares the values that motivate civil society activism and who has spoken with enthusiasm

about the importance of working with civil society.

The question is can the People's Action Party that has been in power since 1959 change its authoritarian ways and ease its curbs on freedom of movement and expression? Does it have the confidence and courage to change? They could begin by acknowledging the injustice perpetrated on the so-called Marxist conspirators.

Back in 1991, George Yeo, then the acting Minister for Information and the Arts, spoke of the need for a stronger “civic society” in Singapore. Making the inaugural NUSS Society lecture, he said: “civic society, which is the stratum of social life between the state and the family, is still weak. Without a strong civic society, the Singapore soul will be incomplete. If the creation of a strong state was a major task of the last lap, the creation of a strong civic society must be a major task of the next lap.”

Using the metaphor of the banyan tree to describe the all-pervasive state institutions under which nothing grows, Mr Yeo said: “When state institutions are too pervasive, civic institutions cannot thrive. Therefore it is necessary to prune the banyan tree so that other plants can also grow.”

Mr Yeo's insightful remarks were made 30 years ago. There is now an even greater need for a strong civil society. It is a need acknowledged by our leadership. It really is time now to trim the banyan tree.

Activists are not the enemy of the state. We are simply trying, in one way or another, to make the world a better place. What motivates and unifies activists is our belief in the importance of ideals and values such as trust, openness, respect, solidarity, freedom of expression, and social justice. These are values that were not always given top priority as we were propelled along the path of economic success.

Singapore will in 2025 celebrate 60 years of independence. There is much to celebrate. The Singapore system is recognised around the world as one that works exceedingly well. It is time for civil society to be fully recognised as a vital part of this Singapore system. It is time for activists, for all activists, to be accorded dignity and respect. It is time for the Singapore soul to be complete.

**What Do You Hope to Achieve
and Why?**