

# No place for effigy burning

Four reasons why such a protest is not the S'pore way of doing things



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By **TOH YONG CHUAN**  
SENIOR CORRESPONDENT

TRANSPORT Minister Lui Tuck Yew recently came close to becoming perhaps the first Cabinet minister in Singapore's history to have his effigy burned in a public protest.

His effigy was toted out two weeks ago at Hong Lim Park, where some 300 people gathered to protest against the public transport fare hike in April.

The police stepped in and the effigy was doused with water instead of being torched.

The water may have lowered the temperature of simmering public frustrations among some over the fare hike, but the incident raises a burning question: Does effigy burning as a form of public protest have a place here?

Although alien to Singapore, burning effigies in public protests is not uncommon elsewhere. Just five months ago, the Miss World pageant was moved from Jakarta to Bali after hardliners staged street protests in the Indonesian capital and burned effigies of the pageant organisers.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong came close to having his effigy burned in Thailand in

March 2006. Thai protesters picketed outside the Singapore Embassy demanding that Temasek Holdings abandon its acquisition of Shin Corp. They burned photos of Mr Lee and his wife, Ms Ho Ching, who is Temasek chief. An effigy of the Merlion was set on fire.

The exact origins of effigy burning are unclear, although it seems to have its roots in witchcraft and black magic. Effigies are life-size models of people that purposely make them look ugly.

In a Parliament sitting on Nov 16, 1961, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew described effigy burning as an act that "symbolically burns and beats the person to death, hoping, by the process of pinpricking the idol and black magic, that some harm would befall the person some thousands of miles away".

Mr Lee was answering Mr David Marshall's question on whether Singapore would sever trade ties with Portugal to protest against the country's war atrocities in Angola. He was also ambivalent towards effigy burning, describing it as "witchcraft methods".

Some have argued online, after the Hong Lim Park protest, that effigy burning is not inconsistent with some aspects of local culture and religious practices.

They are not wrong. Paper models of servants, houses and cars are commonly burned as offerings during the Chinese Hungry Ghost month. There is also



the superstitious Chinese practice of *da xiao ren*, or beating evil people, where a person uses slippers or shoes to beat a paper effigy of a rival before burning it.

Hindus celebrate Dussehra, a festival before Deepavali, where the mythical 10-headed king Ravana is burned in effigy signifying the victory of good over evil.

Still, these cultural and religious practices are different from the burning of effigies in public protests. They are neither violent nor do they stoke public anger.

There are at least four reasons why there is no place for effigy burning as a form of public

protest here.

One, it is plainly dangerous to set fire to objects in public.

When rules were relaxed in 2008 to allow outdoor protests at Hong Lim Park, the intention was always for such demonstrations to be peaceful and safe. Public safety should not be tossed out of the window just because outdoor protests are allowed.

Two, even if protest organisers can argue that effigies can be burned safely, say campfire style, where does the burning stop?

If effigies can be burned, why not also have a bonfire to burn textbooks to protest against the

education system?

In fact, why stop at textbooks? It was less than two years ago when a controversial US pastor burned copies of the Quran, stoking anger worldwide.

Three, the burning of an effigy directs attention to a person, not the underlying policy. And policies are far more than just one person, even if he is the minister.

I am not a big fan of some of our transport policies - from the ERP rates that refuse to come down to the MRT system that keeps grinding to a halt.

But surely Mr Lui cannot be expected to bear the full brunt of

our unhappiness. He is a convenient target, nothing more. Burning his effigy may make the protesters feel somewhat better, but it is not going to improve public transport policies.

Member of Parliament Seng Han Thong suffered serious burns in 2009 when a mentally unstable former cab driver set him on fire. It is unclear whether the assailant was unhappy with taxi policies and vented it on the taxi association chief.

Indeed, Mr Seng was punched in 2006 by another former cabby who had lost his taxi licence.

Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan says it stirs up "emotions rather than trying to get any substantive point across or propose alternative solutions. Let's deal with the issues, not personalities".

Four, the burning of effigies incites hatred and violence. There is no place for hatred and violence in any civil society.

Mr Lim Biow Chuan, an MP, describes effigy burning as "not the Singapore way of doing things".

I agree.

Former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong, a lawyer with a known liberal bent, says that effigy burning "always has a place on the spectrum of lawful free expression" and "there is nothing inherently unlawful about it". Even so, he acknowledges that it would require "fairly extreme circumstances" for the public to support effigy burning.

Singapore is not at the state of extreme circumstances yet.

There is simmering public unhappiness over policies such as transport and housing, which the Government is working to fix.

Some policies require tweaking and others overhauling, but they are not broken.

I was glad that the protest organiser switched tactics and doused the effigy with water instead. But consider this: What next? Trampling on the effigy? Punching it? Where then would we draw the line?

I may change my mind about burning, dousing, trampling or punching effigies if there is rampant corruption or policy failures.

For now, I am sitting it out, because the system is far from broken and there is no need for such extreme acts. Extremism will only break the system, not mend it.

tohyc@sph.com.sg