



Drink, drank, drunk, drought?



Drinking in public at night, and its aftermath, as seen in Clarke Quay, will soon be a thing of the past, if the Liquor Control Bill is passed next week. It would put an end to rowdy scenes, drunkenness and littering. But stricter rules in Little India, where there are already alcohol curbs, raise concern that foreign workers may be unfairly targeted. ST FILE PHOTOS

As the public debate on the proposed alcohol curbs rages on, Insight finds out what the trade-offs are

By RACHEL AU-YONG

UNTIL this week, the biggest complaint most alcohol drinkers had about Singapore was that the country's liquor prices were more bubbly than those in nearby countries.

But new laws proposing to ban boozers here from buying alcohol and drinking it in public places at night are threatening to upend their punch bowl.

If passed next week, the Liquor Control (Supply and Consumption) Bill will outlaw alcohol consumption in public places between 10.30pm and 7am. It will also ban the sale of liquor from 10.30pm.

In addition, Geylang and Little India will become Liquor Control Zones, with stricter restrictions

on the consumption and sale of alcohol there.

Not surprisingly, the Bill – which was introduced in Parliament on Monday – drew strong and mixed reactions, with some toasting it and others giving it the thumbs down.

A year-long public consultation of more than 1,000 people by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) showed that about eight in 10 supported a partial ban on alcohol consumption and sales, as well as restrictions at crowded places.

Supporters believed such measures would reduce threats to public safety and mitigate the disamenities associated with the sale and consumption of alcohol.

But in a Straits Times online poll, more than 75 per cent of the 12,000 people polled said they

were not in favour of the Bill, citing concerns about over-regulation and discriminatory practices.

Others questioned the need for such laws.

National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan asked if enough problems had arisen from people buying and drinking alcohol at night to warrant the new curbs.

Geylang and Little India were the areas with the highest numbers of public-order offences in 2013 – 49 and 25 respectively. But, even then, there have been criticisms that the harsher liquor laws and stricter penalties for flouting them in these places seem too draconian.

Insight explores what lies behind the tabling of the Liquor Control Bill and the trade-offs.

In the public interest

A KNEE-JERK reaction to the proposed laws has been to blame the Little India riots in December 2013, where alcohol was said to

have been a contributing factor in turning crowds of passers-by into an angry mob.

But the alcohol curbs were actually in the works long before that.

Tanjong Pagar GRC MP Indraneel Rajah, whose ward covers nightlife hot spot Robertson Quay, started pushing for alcohol-free zones as early as 2011.

So did Moulmein-Kallang GRC MP Denise Phua, whose Little India residents complained of rowdy behaviour late at night and streets strewn with empty beer cans the morning after.

In fact, when it comes to tightening liquor laws, Singapore has so far been slower to impose restraints than many other countries and cities.

In New York City, Perth and Brisbane, public alcohol consumption is banned at all times.

Closer to home, less drastic measures are employed.

While Muslims in Malaysia are barred from drinking alcohol, non-Muslims do not face any curbs in most states, other than

some local governments discouraging the sale of alcohol in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods.

And in the Philippines, drinking is banned in public places only during elections and on special occasions when crowd control is essential.

Singapore's proposed new laws fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of alcohol curbs.

Indeed, when compared to some other tough laws for which Singapore has made international headlines, the proposed alcohol restraints appear quite mild.

In 1992, the Republic became the first country to ban the import and sale of chewing gum.

Last year, the island also became the first known country to ban the import and sale of shisha.

For the alcohol ban, the MHA has been quick to clarify that it will adopt a "calibrated approach" to enforcing the new laws if they are passed. It has made clear that those caught drinking during restricted hours will face no further action if they dispose of the alcohol when told to.

Part of the public reaction stems from what seems to some like a sudden curtailment of freedom.

"Just looking at the status quo, it's no wonder some feel the laws are a disproportionate curb on personal liberty," Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan tells Insight.

"But the proposed laws, which are long overdue, bring us more in line with the rest of the world."

And just like in the rest of the world, some long-suffering residents here simply want their nights free of cacophonous drunks, and their streets free of vomit.

Madam Stacy Tay, 41, a Watermark @ Robertson Quay resident, is keeping her fingers crossed that the laws are passed, after having to put up with loitering clubbers and broken glass for three years.

"Even the cleaners are fed up – they just sweep the broken glass to the side. When we walk the dog at night, we have to take along a torchlight to avoid stepping on the glass," she said.

The right to drink

CLEANER, quieter, possibly even safer streets should sound appealing to all. But even as the Bill awaits a debate in Parliament next week, three groups of opponents have already raised their voices against it.

The first comprises casual drinkers annoyed by the inconvenience of having to carefully time their purchase and public consumption of alcohol. For clubbers and those who enjoy a relatively cheap drink from a minimart and hanging out at void decks or along the Clarke Quay and Robertson Quay stretch, the laws are likely to put a dent in their plans.

Says university student Abigail Gan, 20, who enjoys a few "roadside cocktails" at Jaki Kim Bridge before partying at Zouk: "My friends and I will have to find somewhere new to hang out, but it probably won't be in any of our homes. It's awkward to drink with your parents around."

Then there are those who may

not even like alcohol, but are up in arms against what they see as over-regulation in principle.

They argue that the Government is using too heavy a hand to deal with the few people who engage in excessive drinking, and in the process it is encroaching into the personal lifestyles of Singaporeans.

Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng is sympathetic towards this group.

"The blanket ban seems to create an atmosphere of control, (implying) that the Government has no confidence in the majority of drinkers who are responsible," he says. "I hope Parliament will at least discuss what sort of signal this sends out."

But worse has happened in the past when the Government was seen to have intervened in the lives of its citizens, says Ms Braema Mathi, president of human rights group Maruah.

She cites the "two is enough" policy that encouraged family planning controls, and the graduate mother scheme, which offered

more benefits to the children of mothers with a university degree.

"They've tried to tell you how many children you can have, or who ought to have children before," Ms Mathi tells Insight.

"As far as this Bill is concerned, I don't have a problem with over-regulation."

She joins a third group of opponents to the Bill, however, in worrying that the proposed laws may in practice be discriminatory. For one thing, the laws could end up unfairly targeting foreign workers, given the heavier restrictions in Geylang and Little India, where such workers hang out.

"If your coffee-shop operators in Geylang or Little India have to do things a lot differently compared to other places, that's a sign that something might not be too fair," she says.

Mr Jolovan Wham, executive director for migrant workers group Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics, is also not convinced there is sufficient

justification for the Liquor Control Zones.

Police ought to disclose statistics on public-order disturbances fuelled by alcohol, in order to justify these hot spots, he says.

He also finds it troubling that dormitories have been gazetted as a public space, leaving foreign workers with no "private" place to drink after 10.30pm.

Mr Wham says: "Everyone else can go home to drink without being prosecuted. Why are foreign workers being singled out?"

SMU law professor Jack Lee adds that the laws could discriminate against the less well-off too. Not everyone can afford to sit in a restaurant to drink their beer, he points out.

And while the law allows for people to apply for permits to drink after 10.30pm, he thinks this may be impractical as most casual events are likely to be spontaneous.

Balancing the trade-offs

MP Hri Kumar Nair (Bishan-Toa

Payoh GRC), a lawyer who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee on Home Affairs and Law, points out that it is hard to draft a law that balances the conflicting interests of those who want curbs on irresponsible drinking, and those who believe in having a licence to drink wherever and whenever they want.

But part of the reason new laws are needed in the first place is that it is difficult to enforce existing laws on public order, he says.

Residents now can call the police to report drunk people at void decks disturbing the peace late at night. But "noise disturbances tend to be of lower priority, so the police will take longer to come down, which means the resident can't sleep," Mr Nair says.

"And what can the police do? If you're just making noise, you're not really breaking the law. At most, you apologise. But once they leave, you might forget and start making noise again."

Most MPs, academics and activists tell Insight that while contro-

versial, the law would give much-needed relief to those who want it most, without overly onerous costs to others.

Clubbers and drinkers will eventually adjust to the new laws, says Prof Tan, adding that it is unlikely these will prove unpopular enough to cost the ruling People's Action Party votes in the next general election.

It might even turn out to be a boon for the party, as the new laws will encourage more responsible drinking, not just among individual drinkers but also liquor sellers.

"It's hard to argue that responsibility lies solely with the individual, particularly when his judgment is impaired," he says.

Indeed, while the Government should take pains to address the various concerns about the liquor curbs at the next debate, the Bill has been a long time coming.

And if it does result in more responsible alcohol consumption and more peaceful nights, that's something all Singaporeans can drink to. rachelaysph.com.sg

How Singapore stacks up against other cities

IN TOKYO No laws on public consumption of alcohol



People unwinding on Friday night at an eatery in the entertainment district of Ginza in Tokyo. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Drunken behaviour rare

IT project manager Dayyan James, 34, is a New Zealander who lived in Tokyo for three years. He is now based in Singapore:

"The Japanese have a much more relaxed view of alcohol, compared with people in New Zealand, where I'm from.

When the Japanese drink, they do drink a lot but I've never seen any drunken violent behaviour.

The Japanese usually drink in the late evening with their work mates.

For those who drink too much, their buddies will make sure they get into a taxi or on a train home.

Occasionally, I would see one or two salarymen slumped on a bench at a train station. The staff there would wake them up and put them on a train or take them out of the station. Rarely were the police called.

But Tokyo does have a heavy police presence. So if there's ever a situation, you'd see a lot of officers: There can be 15 officers showing up to settle a verbal argument at a

karaoke lounge or pub.

Even then, they don't treat public drinking as a big deal. If someone is sitting in the middle of the street with a bottle, they might move them off but that's it.

This is a large contrast to Wellington, where I lived until my mid-20s.

Despite strict laws against drinking in public, people would flout the laws. I would see people being taken away by the police every weekend for being a public nuisance.

But the number is not big, maybe only one in 20 get really drunk and cause problems.

For those who drink in public, the police would take the booze off them and throw it away. I've never seen anyone get fined.

I think the difference between Japan and New Zealand is our attitudes towards drinking. The big drinkers in New Zealand drink to get drunk while, in Japan, the culture is to drink to socialise and forget their stresses at work."

LIM YAN LIANG



IN BRISBANE No alcohol allowed in public places. Shops can't sell alcohol after 10pm



In Brisbane, the law states that bartenders cannot serve alcohol to anyone who appears to be drunk. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Strictly enforced laws

Undergraduate Thompson Wong, 25, has been studying in Brisbane for the last two years. He also works as a part-time bartender in the Australian city.

"It was quite a culture shock when I first came into contact with Australia's drinking laws. Some other Singaporean students and I decided to get drinks first before going to a club.

We went to a liquor store and bought beer, cider and mixed drinks. We were drinking along the street when a policeman stopped us and gave us a stern warning. We had to throw our alcohol away.

Later, I found out from my Australian friends that we had been very lucky, because the public drinking laws are very strictly enforced. Later, I heard that three other students were fined between A\$200 (S\$216) and A\$300 for drinking in a public place.

After that incident, I stopped drinking outside, and my friends and I would usually drink at one of their apartments before heading out for a night on the town. It is

also quite common for young Australians to drink at home or at a friend's place before heading out. I have not heard anyone here complain about the laws.

The Australian alcohol laws don't end with a ban on public consumption - if you appear drunk, the bouncers at a club will eject you, and the police will force you to go home.

Before I could get a job as a bartender, I had to get a Responsible Server of Alcohol certification, a three-hour course that anyone who wants to work at an establishment serving alcohol has to take. The law

states that bartenders cannot serve alcohol to anyone who appears to be drunk.

The streets right outside of the pubs and clubs in Brisbane are relatively cleaner than in Singapore. There are a lot of cigarette butts and other trash, but there are no beer or liquor bottles lying around, compared to outside Zouk.

You still have police cars and the odd arrest, but there's less vomit and general chaos."

LIM YAN LIANG



IN NEW YORK Public consumption of alcohol has been prohibited since 1979



Drinking in public is frowned upon but getting drunk in a bar is condoned. When people buy alcohol, they put it in a brown bag. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Ban widely accepted

Taiwanese-American Nick Yen, 45, lived in New York for seven years in the 1980s, and now spends up to a month there every year. He is currently based in Singapore and owns the Orgo Bar and Restaurant.

"New York has had open container laws (prohibiting opened containers of alcohol in certain areas) for decades and, because they've been around for so long, no one is really bothered by them.

I buy alcohol from the shops there quite regularly after midnight, and then take it home to drink with friends.

Retail sales of alcohol are not restricted, but you have to put your purchase in a brown bag and you cannot consume the alcohol in public.

There aren't any restrictions on sale hours either - you just have to prove your age.

The few times I've seen people carry beer bottles in public, they were actually homeless people who were looking for trouble. They tend to be the ones who drink in

public, because they don't have a place where they can go to drink.

Having the laws in place for so long certainly has resulted in a culture where drinking in a public place is frowned upon. But people in the United States are generally more concerned about their rights and, if they feel you are infringing on their right to

have a comfortable evening or to enjoy their living space, they will call the police.

That's not to say New Yorkers don't drink - in fact, a lot of people do get drunk. But if you are going to a bar and get intoxicated

inside one, that's generally condoned as long as you are not creating a nuisance.

The laws don't mean that the streets are any cleaner physically. You still see beer bottles lying around, even though people are more discreet about public drinking.

There is a general acceptance in the US that such laws are for the common good, and it's just a matter of getting used to them."

LIM YAN LIANG

