

Room for civil society to grow in Singapore

By Imelda Saad
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Political observers say the recently concluded Our Singapore Conversation exercise shows how better collaboration can lead to improved policies.



SINGAPORE: Political observers believe there is scope for civil society to grow in Singapore.

They pointed to the recently concluded Our Singapore Conversation exercise which they said shows how better collaboration can lead to improved policies.

However, they also added that this could present new challenges to governance.

When Singapore was shrouded in haze last month, 25-year-old Jeremy Chua felt he needed to act.

He set up a Facebook page "SG Haze Rescue" calling for volunteers, donations for air purifiers and masks as well as seeking Singaporeans willing to open up their air-conditioned homes to those who need it.

At its peak, the site attracted some 300,000 unique visitors. About 400 volunteers responded to his call and N-95 masks came in from as far as Hong Kong and Los Angeles from overseas Singaporeans.

Mr Chua said: "I believe that we don't just live in the world that we live in. We create the world that we live in and want to live in. It's our responsibility as people, regardless whether we're government or not, we should contribute and make the society that we imagine it to be."

It is this sense of ownership that the government is trying to encourage.

In his National Day Message, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke about striking a "new balance between the roles of the individual, the community and the state".

Mr Lee said: "We must strengthen our sense of community. We need to give greater mutual support to one another - helping the less fortunate in big ways and small; volunteering for causes that we care about; organising ourselves to work for the common good."

Observers said this should also apply to civil societies even if there is a risk of tension with special interest groups.

They pointed out that seeking out divergent views is important to policy-making.

Nominated Member of Parliament Faizah Jamal explained: "That level of discourse is not necessarily with the same people and that is where the government has to probably learn to navigate who are these other parties involved and why should we listen to these others?"

"Should we not just listen to these established ones? I think there has to be a recognition that this is growing and this can only grow day by day. Are they prepared to come and engage with us without being necessarily defensive, maybe it's about learning how to engage, learning how to listen, without feeling under siege."

"Maybe there's another alternative way, maybe there's another view. If they can identify that these views when taken into account, make for a better policy, then that engagement becomes empowering."

Associate Professor Kenneth Paul Tan from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy agreed.

"Civil society is a place where people volunteer their efforts to provide services to others but it is also a place where people can vent their views to make their ideas about what makes for good policies known to find more amplification for their views.

"I think civil society can also be a space where it becomes a sounding board that the government can refer to when they think about their policy making. At its most basic level, it can be that. But I also think civil society can be valuable because it's a place where conventional wisdom can be challenged. It's not a good idea to ignore these challenges," he said.

Observers said this idea of co-creation may make governance more complicated, but they added that is an inevitable product of a maturing society.

"I think it says that we are maturing to a state in place as a society where governance is not a prescribed reserve of the government and civic action is not something which requires permission. Governance is now a shared universe," said Devadas Krishnadas, a risk consultant at Future-Moves.

He added: "Civic action is now where no permission is required. You should participate. I think there are certain boundaries which are sensible, logical, that we should adopt as a society without the government having to impose that on us. These are that it should be civil, it should be constructive."

Associate Professor of Law at the Singapore Management University Eugene Tan described it as a people and government relationship which is "more textured".

"It has been very much top down. The question now is can these consultations then unleash ground up initiatives, ground up energies, in getting the ground, the different stakeholders to work together for a common purpose.

"How do the different groups rise up to the challenge and also how do the government agencies deal with competing and even sometimes even conflicting positions from different groups?"

He added: "Governance will definitely be a lot messier, untidy if I can put it that way. But I think we should not be taken away by the form because ultimately if the substance of policies, solutions are able to address the concerns of different groups, then I think we will then have policies and solutions which the different groups feel that they have an interest in, which they will then feel that they need to also play their part in making sure that it works."

This is something Jeremy can identify with.

"I think we're beginning to see those spaces emerging and it's actually quite important to allow those spaces to flourish because it will make people more responsible for their thoughts and for their actions," said the tech entrepreneur.

Observers said trust is especially important in this new landscape, not just between government and people but also among Singaporeans with very disparate views.

They added that tension isn't necessarily a bad thing if the over-arching goal is for the discourse to lead to a better Singapore.

Assoc Prof Kenneth Paul Tan said: "If we could develop more social capital, more trust, then it actually helps us to forge partnerships, forge collaborations, understand what is in the interest of different stake holders and then with that amount of trust, try to harmonise the system so that we can actually come up with policies that are meaningful to all rather than just a segment."

He said the Our Singapore Conversation process was particularly useful in helping the state and people, become better collaborators.

"To me, the OSC process is more valuable in this respect (of helping Singaporeans becoming better collaborators) than as a machine for producing good policies at the end," said Assoc Prof Kenneth Paul Tan.