Singapore's Constrained Civil Society: Between Liberalization and Repression

Singapore is not known for its vibrant civil society. In fact, the electoral authoritarian regime under the dominance of the People's Action Party has for a long time greatly restricted any space for activism. In 1991, George Yeo, the Acting Minister of Information and the Arts at the time, declared in a seminal speech that “civic society, which is the stratum of social life between the state and the family, is still weak” and acknowledged that for “civic institutions to grow, the state must withdraw a little and provide more space for local initiatives.” In the following years, the need for an “active citizenry” was stressed repeatedly and made an important goal of the government. However, at the same time, the ruling party remained deeply worried about the potential of contentious politics to threaten the political stability of Singapore, which is seen as a necessary precondition of economic development.

A number of prominent independent civil society groups have emerged over the years. This includes the Association for Women in Action and Research (AWARE) (since 1985), the Singapore Heritage Society (since 1986), Nature Society (Singapore) (independent since 1992), the human rights organizations Maruah Singapore (since 2007) and Think Centre (since 1999), and the worker organizations TransientWorkers Count Too (TWC2), Humanitarian Organization for Migrant Economics (HOME), and Transitioning.org. Recently, a number of organizations have also been formed in the arts including Theatreworks, The Necessary Stage, The Substation and Wild Rice. Increasingly, there are also a growing number of unregistered organizations including a growing number of civil society networks. Finally, the majority of non-profit organizations in Singapore have been coopted by the government through funding, organizational networks, and leadership.

The fact that it is possible to actually name the independent groups, however, demonstrates how small the field is. In addition, many civil society activists are members of more than one organization. The reason for this is that there are still many constraints that discourage individuals from engaging in activism. First and foremost, civil society organizations in Singapore are controlled through the Societies Act, most recently revised in 2014, which allows the government to deny the application of any organization, for instance if the government deems it against the national interest. Moreover, the law also grants special status to so-called “political associations” which may have only members which are Singaporean or permanent residents. In addition, it may not have any connection to organizations in other
countries. As a consequence of these limitations, Singaporeans for Democracy (SFD) decided to de-register in 2012 because of the limits imposed on registration and operation as well as on the activities of the organization. In 2011, the government gazetted the popular socio-political blog The Online Citizen as a political association, which under the Political Donation Act subsequently limited it from receiving any donations from outside of Singapore.

Secondly, the activities of civil society groups are also severely controlled through legislation limiting freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. The former includes laws against defamation, sedition and scandalizing the judiciary which have been used against political speech. Most recently, Roy Ngerng was sued for slander after comparing the government’s administration of the Central Provident Fund to a misappropriation scheme by a local church. In November 2014, he was found guilty of defaming the prime minister and in May 2015 ordered to pay S$29,000 (€18,000). Similarly, Amos Yee, a 16-year old teenager, was found guilty for insulting the feelings of Christians and an obscene cartoon picture following his uploading of a Youtube video in which he had declared that the first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, had been a horrible person. He had to serve a four weeks back-dated jail sentence in June 2015. There are many other instances in which the government threatened with a lawsuit but accepted an apology from the offender following the removal of the supposedly offensive content. This includes LGBT activist Alex Au for a blog post about the prime minister and cartoonist Leslie Chew for a cartoon that had alleged racism in the government, both in 2013. In the latter case, the alleged offender was even arrested for a while.

In addition to targeting individuals, the government also closely controls the media. Radio, television and newspapers are all owned by government-linked corporations and additionally constrained under the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act. The press often praises the government’s many achievements while there is virtually no investigative journalism. Foreign publications, which publish critical articles, can be restricted in their circulation. While online media is more plural, the government’s Media Development Authority introduced a new licensing scheme for websites in 2013 which require the posting of a bond of S$50,000 (€32,000) and the automatic removal of any offending content within 24 hours. While initially, the scheme only included the independent Yahoo! News Singapore, subsequently a number of other news websites were included such as The Independent Singapore, The Online Citizen, Mothership.sg, and the Middle Ground. In late 2013, one website called Breakfast Network, decided to close down rather than to comply with the onerous registration requirements. Overall, the use of repression against individuals coupled with ownership structures and registration requirements is meant to induce self-censorship among content providers and thus greatly limits the public discourse.

Aside of the restrictions of speech, the government has been even less tolerant toward public displays of activism. Until 2000, it was virtually impossible to organize any kind of protest anywhere in Singapore. Any attempt to register a protest was denied. Even attempts to circumvent the law, which then allowed three or fewer people to protest were met with a very
harsh response from the government. In 2006, political activist Chee Soon Juan organized a three-day civil-disobedience protest during the World Bank and International Monetary Fund meeting against repression in Singapore which became a stand-off with the police. The protest led to the creation of a Public Order Law in 2009, which allows the government to force individuals to leave a public space even if they have not broken any rules yet. Since then, the police has issued at least 20 so-called move-on orders. While most complied, one person was arrested because he refused. Furthermore, Singapore still has an Internal Security Act, which allows for arrest without warrant. While it is currently no longer used against activists, in 1987, 24 social activists were arrested under the pretense that they were organizing a Marxist conspiracy. Some of the arrested were forced into televised confessions, which many repudiated later. The government has never accepted responsibility for the events. Overall, these rules and their application contribute to a culture of fear that, while less potent today, still permeates civil society.

Since 2000, the government has allowed protests if they are limited to a so-called Speakers' Corner in Hong Lim Park, which is located away from major government buildings. While at first police registration was required, this was made abandoned in 2008. Some topics including those related to ethnic groups or religion are still not permitted. Moreover, foreigners may not participate in any protest. In October 2014, about six Hong Kongers were questioned for their attendance of a support rally for the democracy movement in Hong Kong, also known as the Umbrella Movement. Despite its limitations, a growing number of activists have used the space. Around 4,000 according to organizers protested in February 2013 against the massive increase in foreigners and a record 28,000 for LGBT rights in an annual Pink Dot event in 2015. This opening showed that the government was willing to allow somewhat greater engagement within a very limited framework. While the LGBT event has attracted a growing number of people, most other protests have remained insignificant.

Activists nowadays are more willing to use tactics of advocacy to influence government policies than in the past. For instance, activists seeking to protect the city-state's last remaining natural areas have employed a wide variety of tactics including signature campaigns, public walks, art exhibitions and speeches to counter developmental plans. Starting in 2011, a wide variety of groups sought to protect Bukit Brown, the largest Chinese cemetery outside of China, against the construction of a road. While the overall goal failed, the government sought to compromise by building a bridge over parts of the environmentally valuable area. More recently, activists have started to campaign for the protection of MacRitchie forest, which is partially threatened by the planned construction of a subway line, which would mean many ecologically valuable trees would have to be cut down. Whether the activists will be able to succeed in this case has yet to be seen.

In conclusion, Singapore's civil society has made some progress over the years. A growing number of pluralist concerns have attracted attention among a small number of activists, who have made use of new forms of advocacy. However, on the whole, the years of gov-
ernment repression have created an apathetic population and instilled a culture of fear. It does not help that the government continues to use strict controls on the freedom of speech and assembly of Singaporeans and residents in order to curtail activism, which is perceived as undermining stability. Unless there is more fundamental political change, the development of an active civil society is likely to remain very slow.

**Author**

**Dr Stephan Ortmann** is Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Asian and International Studies at City University of Hong Kong. He works on issues related to political and social change in East and Southeast Asia, with an emphasis on Singapore, Hong Kong, Vietnam, and China. His publications have appeared in many journals including the Journal of Democracy, Asian Survey, Administration & Society, Pacific Review, and Government and Opposition. He is also the author of two monographs: Managed Crisis: Legitimacy and the National Threat in Singapore (VDM, 2009) and Politics and Change in Singapore and Hong Kong: Containing Contention (Routledge, 2010).

**Contact:** sortmann@cityu.edu.hk

**Further information:** www.stephanortmann.de