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Civil versus civic society in Singapore

Singapore has changed dramatically in the last forty years, moving in the 1960s and 1970s from domestic import substitution to low-cost export-oriented goods. Then in the 1980s developing a regional financial and business hub and now increasingly positioning itself as an exporter of capital and expertise (Courtenay 1995: 90). With exceptionally high economic growth rates most years, a GNP per capita of US$6,000 more than Australia and three times Australia’s annual average growth, Singapore has attracted a high percentage of foreign direct investment. Despite exhibiting similar advantages to Australia in terms of a well-educated workforce, competitive pricing, developed transport and telecommunications and citizens from culturally diverse business, family and personal networks throughout the region, Singapore’s media and resultant civil and civic development has not been as progressive and liberal as Australia’s and indeed has not kept pace. So it would appear that state existence, security and prosperity as desired ends for Singapore do not necessarily rely on an equal strengthening of the public sphere, or at least this is not evident to date.

The question most often asked, of course, about Singapore’s generally consistent economic growth is, ‘at what price?’ and many observers of Singapore rarely get beyond the somewhat simplistic assumption that the price is at the cost of a well-developed civil society where individuals can network in one form or another to voice dissent, mobilise opposition to one-party power and change society. This concern extends back to the early decades of Singapore’s nation-building preoccupation, and as Singaporeans continue to claim, an inability to control information and ideas (Tremewan 1996). The Working Committee (TWC), for example, established a few years ago as an informal network of committed Singaporeans interested in the development of civil society in Singapore, has run a number of forums on the issues (TWC 1999), including a significant conference on civil society in Singapore in October 1999 (focas 2001: 1.1, 1.2).

But it is not easy. Gillian Koh and Ooi Giok Ling suggest that it is remarkable in such a ‘tightly controlled democracy’ (see Koh and Ling 2000:
5) that interest groups, such as The Nature Society (Singapore), the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) and the association for Muslim Professionals (AMP), have survived at all let alone made attempts to push the boundaries of policy and political engagement. Most of these groups, however, simply provide a forum for alternative voices rather than action or change, or operate where the state has promoted discussion of civic concerns. It has even been suggested that this governmental initiative stems purely from governmental self-interest and a realisation that it has over-extended itself in the management of society.

Whilst there have been proactive voices calling for greater civil society participation for some years now in Singapore, they are, in fact, a very small section of a basically compliant and passive population. Media world-wide continues to promulgate the view that Singapore is restrictive, secretive, authoritarian, non-consultative, repressive, closed and impervious to criticism. In short, Singapore is a one-party state with national service, an internal security act which can imprison a person without trial for a periods of up to two years without review, and which, as recent reports in the world press have shown, has no intention of relinquishing these controls (Rodan 2000). There is a widespread perception both within and outside of Singapore that there is a predominant and pervasive culture of fear operating in Singapore – not fear of walking safely in the streets, but a fear of speaking up – a fear of expressing dissent, a fear of critical comment.

This fear is one of the most likely constraints on Singapore’s ability to develop fully as a significant regional and global media and IT hub – one of the main aims of current government policy. This fear is also one of the main reasons for the government being responsive, in some ways, in the last couple of years, to calls for greater participation, seen most markedly in the various feedback groups that have been formally set up by government. In October 1999 the Singapore 21 committee was established by the Prime Minister, in his words: ‘to suggest new ideas to make Singapore a global city, and the best home for Singaporeans’. What constitutes that best home for all Singaporeans and does it involve an active civil society?

Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in an interview with Michael Shari and Mark L. Clifford under a heading ‘Deputy Prime Minister Lee: Opening the Society, Slowly’ in Business Week (5 April 1999), put it this way when asked ‘Do the people need to participate more?’:

Yes, we need that. There is a lot more room for participation in civic society. It’s something we have to encourage because it’s not the way our society has developed. So if we want to shift away from this, and give people more say, then they cannot just express casual views after some drinks in the coffee shop. Hard work has to be put in.

Brigadier General Lee’s comments are interesting as he is very protective of the role and power of the government yet, at the same time, he is projecting
a more agreeable and flexible image suited to the foreign media. However, at no point is there discussion of participatory civil society. Indeed the phrase that is used by the Singapore government in place of civil society is the one used in this interview, ‘civic society’, and that is a very different society to the one generally developed in most sociological understandings of what constitutes civil society.

The economic crisis of 1997 served to renew debate about the relationship between the state and civil society. Contrary to the predominantly negative voices, a small voice is emerging that suggests the possibility and desirability of a paradigm shift that believes in synergistic gains and developmental achievements as a result of state and society complementarities (see Koh and Ling 2000: 2).

The predominant view of civil society, however, like many social justice moves in Singapore, is always interpreted as a threat to the Singapore government, which continually runs the line that any political intervention by any Singapore citizen should be made within the political arena. Therefore, the role of a citizenry that has any sort of voice at all is best controlled within the framework of a civic society, which determines the roles and functions of a citizen for the better good of society overall, than within the framework of a civil society which, for the most part, is less easily controlled. Within Brigadier General Lee’s discourse, and that of the government overall, and in their approach to the issues involved in civil society, there is still very little room for manœuvre outside government control. The culture of control is all pervasive and is the single most important challenge to the development of civil society organisations, and the much broader definitions of ‘citizenship’ that go with that, within Singapore.

Public sphere and media

Michel Foucault argued that the promotion of the ‘existence, security and prosperity of the state as its end, produces the need for a civil society and a strong public sphere which would both criticise the effectiveness and necessity of the development of state policies of intervention and regulation, and in certain instances replace it’ (Birch 1998b, 1999 and Birch et al. 2001). What constitutes that public sphere in Singapore?

Information flow has generally been from developed, industrialised nations in the North to developing nations in the South (Braman and Sreberny-Mohammadi 1996; Stevenson 1994; Riaz 1997 and Vincent 1999). It is certainly from that direction that grass-roots thinking on civil society in Singapore emerges. Quite the opposite direction from government thinking on the issue (see Ahmad 1995 and Kwak 1996). What we are seeing is a dramatic increase in the liberalisation of information flow and infrastructure in Singapore (and across the whole region, but not necessarily a liberal government attitude) and it is this liberalisation which appears to offer those
in Singapore anxious to ‘create’ a civil society opportunities not hitherto so openly seen. The question, of course, is whether a liberalisation of communication will necessarily create the conditions in Singapore for the development of a civil society and, if it does, what would that civil society look like?

Jurgen Habermas argues that the public sphere works most effectively for democracy when it is institutionally independent of both the state and society’s dominant economic forces. Although he acknowledges such autonomy is difficult to develop and maintain, he still posits this as a goal to achieve. His argument expands to suggest that ‘[t]here be no restriction on the range of political viewpoints and that resources be allocated in such a way that powerful economic and political actors cannot drown out the ideas of media representing the less powerful segments of society’ (Herman and McChesney 1997: 3–4). From this perspective

the media are the preeminent vehicles of communication through which the public participates in the political process and the quality of their contribution to the public sphere is an important determinant of the quality of the democracy. If the performance is poor, people will be ignorant, isolated, and depoliticised, demagoguery will thrive, and a small elite will easily capture and maintain control over decision-making on society’s most important political matters.

(ibid.)

In Singapore there is a close identification between government (basically as a single political party) and state. The public sphere is not autonomous – separated from political apparatuses of the state (Chua 2000; Birch et al. 2001). Quite the contrary: where possible, the state uses the public sphere, particularly the print and electronic media, as a means of consolidating and extending its power, and censoring public opposition – but with ever increasing subtlety and sophistication via a content processing and psychological operation at the self-regulatory level and through strategic operation controls at other levels. This is evidenced in a recent address by the Minister of State for Defence and Information and the Arts, David T.E. Lim, at the Internet Political Economy Forum 2001, 14 September 2001, in which he emphasised good over evil in the government’s imperatives for credibility, vulnerability, privacy, security, accountability and the use of Internet Political Campaigns. The media in Singapore generally, as a realisation of the public sphere, despite the appearance of being privatised, is politicised, monopolised and regulated by the state, and plays a central role in promoting the idea of the nation as a homogeneous and unified community, often in very subtle ways (see Chalinee Hirano’s chapter on Japan in this volume for discussion of similar processes).

Yet an international orientation and many diverse cultural networks have been central to the Singaporean government’s economic success (Chua 1985:...
30). This is reflected in the communication sector through programme and language diversity. It is imbued with ‘natural’, ‘necessary’ and ‘realistic’ characteristics to satisfy issues of nation-building. This is then ultimately linked to the instrumental rationality for the unrelenting pursuit of economic growth (Chua 1985: 30). How then is this control maintained so as to prevent or curb the growth of an active civil society feeding off an ever-increasing, internationalised flow of information and ideas which is currently seen as counter to the dominant People’s Action Party’s (PAP) own sectarian interests?

The answer lies with the Ministry for Information and the Arts (MITA), a ministry that deals with government information matters and is the link between the government and the media. Its mission is to make Singapore a ‘hub city’ in line with national economic imperatives (Foo and Kwok 1999: 270).

Former Straits Times journalist Cherian George (cited in Lee and Birch 2000: 12; see also George and Pillay 2000) argues that MITA’s role incorporates a strong control and supervisory function determining and enforcing the OB marker concept (‘out-of-bounds-markers’). This has strong watchdog overtones that are particularly contrary to the national content and communication imperatives of the people and tends to restrict or prohibit inflow and outflow. MITA deals with government information matters, conducts public communication programmes and manages government press relations. ‘It is the main distribution agency for government press statements, ministerial speeches and other information from government departments, institutions and statutory boards’ (MITA 2000: 270). It operates as an official information service for news organisations based in Singapore and formulates, implements and reviews policies on censorship and licensing of content. ‘The Board of Film Censors (BFC) is a component of the Films and Publications Department [that] comes under the Ministry of Information and the Arts’ (MITA 1999).

### Regulation and television

The Ministry for Information and the Arts is the central controlling authority, but it is the Singapore Broadcasting Authority that exercises maximum control over television broadcasting in Singapore. There are several divisions and branches of both the Singapore Broadcasting Authority that share control over the ways in which Singaporean television operates. As such, the Singapore Broadcasting Authority is a mediating regulatory system. It links, yet stands between, the state and television broadcasters, thus performing a filtering role. This allows for negotiation and discussion that diffuses the power–subject relationship. In this way, the Singapore Broadcasting Authority becomes an arbiter assisting in dispute resolution and promoting the appearance of openness and democracy.
(Hoong cited in SBA 1999). It also becomes an enabling body for the promotion of the medium (see Birch 1996).

The Singapore Broadcasting Authority was established on 1 October 1994 as a statutory board under MITA to promote and regulate the broadcasting industry. Its corporate mission is to make Singapore a dynamic broadcasting hub by providing quality broadcasting to satisfy the vibrant economy and diverse populations (SBA 2000, www.sba.gov.sg). It was formed following the corporatisation of Singapore’s broadcasting industry under the Singapore Broadcasting Act 1994 and as the new regulatory body, for all intents and purposes, was to divest power from the state to the new body for control over broadcasting and in response to greater global economic circumstances of the twenty-first century. The ‘apron strings’ were loosened but not completely cut as the government still retains considerable influence through the allocation of top appointments.

The Singapore Broadcasting Authority licenses and regulates broadcasting services and apparatus. It determines qualities for programming content and contracts and assigns frequencies. SBA monitors broadcasting licence compliance and collects fees. Licences range from free-to-air television and radio, subscription television and radio, through special text, video-on-demand and broadcast data licences. It lists as its objectives:

- To ensure a range of high quality broadcasting services which meet the diverse needs of the public;
- To ensure the adequate provision of public service programmes;
- To help develop national values by promoting desirable broadcasting services;
- To facilitate a conducive environment that will encourage the development of a vibrant broadcasting hub in Singapore;
- To promote the introduction of multimedia and interactive services made possible by the rapid advances of technology; and
- To build an effective organisation that develops and motivates employees to strive for excellence in the services provided.

(SBA 2000)

Singapore is actively using its economic power and knowledge-driven economy to protect its own broadcast industry. It aims to expand into the region through cooperative business ventures. New initiatives, research and development are driving the industry most rapidly in new media, digital, satellite and cable broadcasts into export orientations, and while this is happening Singapore is re-regulating. By this we mean it is not reducing its control but re-regulating to moderate its position in order to maintain internal control yet, at the same time, gain commercial advantages from the broader regional and global liberalisation of communication. Historically, the role of the state, in terms of television broadcast, has gone through three phases – minimal technical control, interventionist regulation and de-
regulation or re-regulation (Kwak 1996). However, as the markets for television grow social influences are becoming more significant. In Singapore, as the populace becomes more educated and informed the demands and expectations from the government increase. This may be a factor in gaining impetus for a redistribution of social power and increased participatory communication. The government is therefore adjusting itself to accommodate these changes and to re-regulate its position of control. To overstate the case, we witness a liberalising at the international external level yet, at the national internal level, an equal and opposite tendency in governmental regulatory control. The traditional role of the state therefore has expanded from simply technological allocation to a multidimensional control over many aspects of broadcasting such as political and economic involvement in the ownership and control of television licences at one extreme to the cultural programming influences at the other (Goonasekera and Ang 2000: 225).

As satellite, cable television and the Internet have opened up an abundance of channels, the argument of spectrum scarcity becomes less convincing as a justification for the state’s control over television broadcasting (Goonasekera and Ang 2000: 225). Yet in Singapore’s case with satellites requiring state authorisation, and essentially banned for public or general use, together with the government’s cross-the-board Internet filtering, then it is clearly evident ‘the control’ remains with the government.

The state, overall then, still exerts its influence on the development of television in terms of ownership and control through regulation and programming. This directly impacts on media credibility, agenda-setting and effects (Kuo et al. 1993: 1). Virtually all aspects of broadcasting are regulated and guided by strict codes of practice (Goonasekera and Ang 2000: 225–6; see also Ang and Yeo 1998). This influence is administered but not enforced through Singapore Broadcasting Authority Regulations. Enforcement is delegated to the higher political ministerial and legal levels, for example, MITA and the relevant appeals boards. In the event that a rule is violated then the perpetrator is subject to suspension or cancellation of licence, relinquishment of licence bond and/or large financial penalties. The penalty scheme for free-to-air television and cable television took effect 1 November 1998. Penalties and courses of action are published in Part XII Offences and Penalties, Singapore Broadcasting Authority Act (Chapter 297) (cited in Ang and Yeo 1998). Although highly unlikely today, in dire circumstances, the state can resort to powers of preventive detention or the special powers for subversive documentation as outlined in the Internal Securities Act (Chapter 143) (cited in Ang and Yeo 1998). Recourse is possible through the Appeal Board. But as Kwak makes very clear, the dominant paradigm of state control of television broadcasting is through a cultural paradigm with law seen as the last resort (Kwak 1996: 308–10). This, of course, has crucial implications for the development of participatory democracy and greater civil society activity.
Corporatisation of the nationalised industry, which was also a public monopoly, was implemented to make the television broadcasters financially and managerially separate. This still allows them free contract for production and transmission services. The reforms separated production from transmission and provided the basis for all the reforms and changes that are occurring today. This was done to achieve a stronger public television and not, as many Singaporeans might have reasonably expected, an atmosphere of liberalism and a greater role for civil society.

Singapore Cable Vision was the smokescreen in this regard, as it was seen as a way of diversifying the supply of television programmes. However, like the terrestrial broadcasters, the state still exercises extensive involvement in the running of its affairs with the SBA regulating ‘all aspects of cable television, from the specifications of the cable and trenches to the content’ (Ang and Nadarjan 1996 cited in Goonasekera and Ang 2000: 228). In fact, Goonasekera and Ang suggest that the introduction of cable television in Singapore was introduced much more as a disincentive than an incentive for greater information liberalism. The introduction of cable, they believe, was to deter the purchase of satellite dishes while still appearing to provide programming choice (Goonasekera and Ang 2000: 227).

Today, Singapore’s state control is rather subtle through an engendering of social responsibility and self-regulation (see Birch 1993 and 1998a). This subtlety is one step removed from the authoritarian impositional style and structure exemplified in the early Schramm developmental model of communication (Schramm, 1964), and, as such, has flow-on effects through the ambivalent uses and approaches in both content production and perception/reception learnt predominantly through reinforcement in practice. (Self)-regulation is left to the television broadcasters in the hope this will improve quality and increase commercialism without destabilising national cohesion and core values. In most models of competitive advantage, the increase in channels would have invariably led to an increase in competition in the areas of programmes and programming. In Singapore’s highly diversified channel markets this is not the case. The censorship policy articulates an allowance for free-flow and creativity but preserves social and religious harmony. Societal comment is thus limited to quasi-official channels for viewer complaint or creative input. Nevertheless, with the new push towards privatisation, more boundaries are being pushed in the provision of various programme types and in the search for profits. Homosexual scenes, kissing, bed scenes and rape have provided some sensational examples, and, to a large extent, it is the occasional pushing of boundaries, and the often extensive media coverage that follows them, that rallies the calls for greater civil society activity.

The key to understanding the government’s position, and therefore to be able to work for change by understanding that position, recognises that the government in Singapore has chosen to replace the word civil with civic. A good example of this involves a story told by Brigadier General George Yeo
in his speech at the opening of the Institute of Policy Studies first ever conference on civil society, when he recounted the time he was at a recent National Day Reception at the National Stadium:

a large crowd was enjoying the spread of local delights, including satay. But some inconsiderate person had left some satay sticks lying on the carpet. I was with the Japanese Ambassador, who saw them, and immediately went to pick up the satay sticks. That’s how they are brought up. Then I asked myself: how long before we become like that? We don’t become like that with people telling us what to do or not what to do. We become like that when we ourselves start taking responsibility. And that is what civil society is.

This example tends to suggest that not only the concept of civil society but also civic society is alien to Singapore. We would disagree with this logic – most, if not all sociologists would disagree – but the important thing is that George Yeo believes (at least for domestic political reasons) that this is a good example of civil society. It is not. It is a very good example of civic responsibility. The two are very different. But the point of recounting this story is not to suggest that someone as intelligent as George Yeo is not able to make a distinction between civic and civil society, but to point out that a political choice has been made by a leading politician in Singapore to interpret one (civil society) in terms of the other (civic society), and that no amount of direct challenge to this interpretation is likely to change the government’s perspective. It is not one made out of ignorance, we would suggest, but out of political skill. And, as such, the key to anyone involved in a civil society organisation is to be able to learn how a government as clever as the one in Singapore operates. And then to apply the lessons learnt in their own strategies and tactics in working for any form of change within Singapore. That means a process in the development of a civil society, which is quite different from other societies, and very specific to the socio-political context of contemporary Singapore.

Old modes of control have perceptual overhangs in the television organisations. Whilst rules are not directly imposed through rigid forms or control mechanisms, today it is hard to lift this overarching culture. Change is slow but it is present. News is now permitted to run without censorship. Despite this, Singaporean television generally is still widely perceived as a public utility through which the public can be informed, educated and entertained. The state has relinquished direct control over programming and programme content by obliging television broadcasters to observe specific programming standards and codes of practice set in Singapore Broadcasting Authority legislation. Broadcasters also add to this their own content and production standards to reduce the potential for viewer complaint and to prevent any possible government reprisal. Through relaxing, but not relinquishing this control, the government still has the power to control through loss of licence
but emphasises the agency of the broadcaster. A close relationship is still maintained between the state and the broadcasting industry as the state continues to initiate, project and formulate policies. There are advisory committees, often comprising industry, academia and state representatives, to assist and guide the government and broadcasters in this process.

Koh Tai Ann, in an article in the *Business Times* in Singapore, wrote ‘restive civil society with its contesting interests and an adversarial stance towards the state (has been) de-politicised and re-conceptualised as a civic society bound more closely to the state’ (*Business Times*, 30–31 May 1998: 12). This process of de-politicising and re-conceptualising in Singapore effectively appropriates the civil society movement to the Singapore government’s own agenda and has been turned back onto Singapore society as civic society, defined by the government in its own terms. This strategy of appropriation has been one of the central tenets of the PAP government maintaining power since 1965 and has proven to be, time and time again, an enormously successful strategy in the politics of power in Singapore.

Rear Admiral Teo Chee Hean, at the first feedback conference in 1998, said that he preferred not to use the term civil society, ‘as in many countries it has come to mean little more than a cacophony of single interest groups, each pulling in its own direction’ (*Straits Times*, 21 June 1998). He prefers the phrase ‘a people sector’ – an active citizenry ‘which takes an interest in community and national issues, understands that Singapore is what we make it to be, and which possesses the passion and commitment to contribute and participate’. In other words, a civil society defined by the Singapore government. The danger, as Kevin Tan, a member of The Round Table (an emerging civil society organisation in Singapore), speaking at the same civil society conference, pointed out, is that ‘if the state perceives civil society as a threat, or civic groups as being confrontational or a challenge to the authority and power, then there is little that can be done to bring about change. At the end of the day, the economy, and related to that, the drive for the PAP to remain in power in Singapore, are the issues that ultimately drive all policy development in Singapore. For example, the five ‘dilemmas’ which the Singapore 21 Committee was asked to consider are, in one way or another, all about those two issues; they are:

- Internationalisation/regionalisation versus Singapore as home;
- less stressful life versus retaining the drive;
- attracting talent versus looking after Singaporeans
- needs of senior citizens versus aspirations of the young;
- consultation/consensus versus decisiveness/quick action.

These are all constructed in an either/or confrontational kind of way – they are not seen as mutually attainable or agreeable objectives but are all ultimately about a social system – a welfare system – which is secondary to a successful economy. Civil society groups that seek change therefore need to
do so in ways that recognise these priorities, rather than simply confronting them. George Yeo, for example, in developing his idea of a ‘web world’ where society is seen as a world of interrelated networks and groups like the world wide web, sees this as functioning well if there are ‘good state–society relations’ which will enable Singapore to compete and survive in a web world. This is a discourse of competition and survival and has been the discourse that has driven the rhetoric of the Singapore government since 1965, and this is not a rhetoric that has changed in the publication of the Singapore 21 Committee report (April 1999). George Yeo argues that ‘civil society and state have to work together to achieve two main things:

- to reinforce the value of the Singapore label;
- expand the network to include friends in the region and beyond.

*(Straits Times, 7 May 1998)*

This does not put people first. This is economic rationalism. The very fact that the Civil Society Conference, which many have seen as a landmark in the development of participation in Singapore, was held behind closed doors and that the only section open to the media was the opening speech, is a very strong indication that little is really changing in Singapore at a government level. But there are considerable changes at non-government levels – which is exactly where civil society develops. But the culture of fear, together with the culture of control, is still very strong. For George Yeo, and presumably the rest of the Singapore government, civil society defined as civic society is best seen as groups who get together voluntarily for a good cause beyond work and family, and that ‘involvement in such groups is also seen as one way to anchor Singaporeans to the country’*(Straits Times, 2 May 1998).* Television has a clear role to play in this.

At this point in time, Singapore appears unconvinced about the benefits of a totally free broadcasting market with direct and perfect competition between national and foreign entrepreneurs, but it is still encouraging foreign investment especially in media training, communication infrastructure and program/content production. Economic imperatives are guaranteeing and prompting change. These changes favour high rates of return on capital and investment in the communications sector, but only if there is market demand from high-end users. Singapore is well placed to benefit from these initiatives because it is a more affluent advanced industrialised country, but its positive economic status also means it is in no rush to change. This twin mechanism of both competition and harmony would suggest, perhaps when viewed optimistically, that the state is preparing the internal market for acceptance of liberal internationalism. Whilst Singapore is aware that it must remain competitive and must maintain its external locus, it is softening and managing the change so that cultural dislocation and shock does not cause a catalytic or anarchistic rebellious response. Hence its caution with civil society developments.
In this, Singapore could be described as treading a path between liberal internationalism and democratisation. Nationally, Singapore appears to be developing its society through information access, education and communication, yet at the same time benefiting from commercial penetration and developing market processes. It appears to be helping the region to achieve substantive improvement in the prospects for democracy, to benefit its citizens socially, culturally and economically while at the same time making economic and diplomatic gains. But it is not a value-neutral path (Hukill 1994, 1996).

Conclusion

If democracy is considered to be a process of conflict and negotiations by competing forces rather than an end product then it is seen as a negociative resolutory framework and reformist by nature. This, however, rejects revolutionary modes of attainment. The most recent discussions on civil society in Singapore (see *focas* 2001, for example) move away from Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s view, given at the Philippine Business Conference, Manila, that suggests discipline rather than a democracy leads to development (see Lee 1992: 38–50) to one of political accommodation still privileging the existing hierarchies of power. We suggest, however, that these views represent civic but not civil society. As yet Singapore does not give citizens the opportunity to actively participate in policy formulation; freedoms of speech, association, judicial rights and representative control are not extant; political contestation is not a privilege and there are no mechanisms for popular accountability (Hewison *et al.*1993: 6).

James Gomez, a leading figure in recent moves towards greater civil society participation in Singapore, believes that the structural constraints of Singapore’s political system hinder the Republic’s political development (Rahim 1998). Penetration and domination of the PAP in all sectors of the society enhances this absolute control mechanism (Gomez 2000: 1–2). Gomez discusses the extent to which the PAP can and does encroach on civil liberties and political rights by explaining how this impacts on the pace of change. The result, according to Gomez, is two extreme political positions moderated by an additional factor as a result of conditioning. At one end the political actors, opposition parties, civil society and interested individuals would like shared governance. At the other extreme the PAP ruling party is reluctant to relinquish control or implement reform. To complicate these issues a cultural conditioning process is ever-present. This is described as a censorial political culture, as a result of four decades of centralised rule (Gomez 2000:1–2).

Gomez claims that the population unexposed to pluralist politics has so internalised the PAP policies to automatically render any variations illegitimate or controversial. Oppositional discourse has historically suffered repercussions, spatial, physical and financial. The populace, out of self-
preservation or out of auto-regulation, therefore prefers to remain distant from oppositional discourse rather than actively engage in conscious opposition. Under these circumstances, any alternative political discourse and the development of a more active civil society becomes problematic.

Gomez indicates how the definition and direction of control is always maintained by the ruling PAP. Such a dominant source of power naturally inhibits personal freedoms. This is very apparent in civil reactions. The population is uneasy with public political discussion. ‘Even if a conscious effort is made to demonstrate balance in delivery and perspective, alternative political views are essentially seen by the majority to be strictly adversarial to the ruling party and likely to carry political consequences … Their first response is to ask whether it is allowed’ (Gomez 2000: 38, see Daniels and Spiker 1994: 148) and according to Cherian George ‘many are willing to sacrifice civil liberties for the practical benefits of an orderly society’ (Ismail 1994: 10).

In some countries this would be seen as a marginalising of civil society, and increasingly in Singapore in recent years this is how many English-educated middle-class Singaporeans have expressed it, using a language and awareness drawn mostly from a relatively small elite, educated overseas, who have been struggling to find ways to engage in the politics of relatively benign dissent in Singapore. There is a sense in Singapore that what is now happening, in more visible ways than has occurred in the past, is a better-articulated call for the redistribution of social power and increased participatory communication. Some in Singapore would see this as the development of a civil society – others would see it as a coming to the surface of many years of underlying discontent; a few, especially some Western observers, would like to see it as the development of dissident movements (Tan 2000). The government, either way, would see it as a threat, but one which it has to manage in quite different ways than some of its more authoritarian reactions of the past.

Singaporean television is changing, but the change from the government’s perspective is rational and measured. Singapore’s broadcasting business seeks to mix competitive normative goals with cooperative national purpose. Singapore’s measured response displays an awareness of the need to ensure the free flow of television broadcasts on one level and the somewhat paternalistic need to protect the local television broadcasting system and the national public on another. Television, for the most part at the moment in Singapore, is caught between the constraints of what it means to be a ‘civic’ actor in a tightly controlled public sphere, and a ‘civil’ audience in a society which recognises the need to be more open, but which has yet to develop the participatory democratic mechanisms to do so effectively.

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