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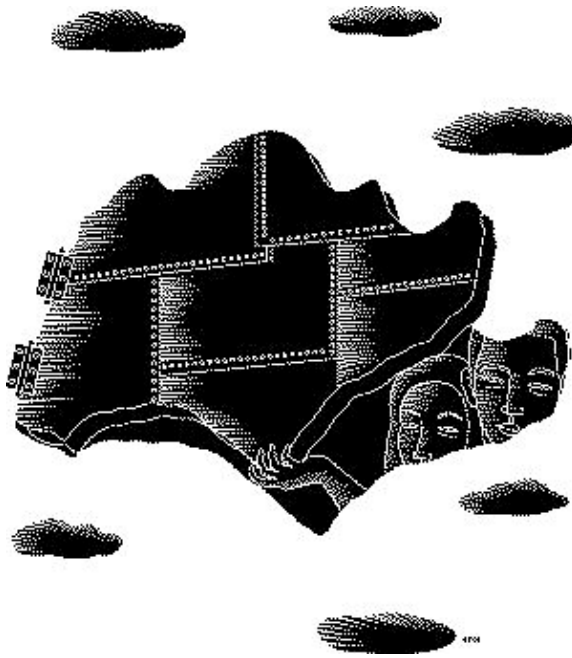
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Jan 20, 2006

Managing political dissent

By Catherine Lim

FOR a small island state eager to take its place among the most successful nations in the free world of practising democracies, one would have expected to see a steady increase in political freedom, an ascending line from its virtual non-existence in the rough early years of brute survival, to the emergence of incomplete but distinct forms in a still evolving ethos, to an end point of full functioning in a mature society.



But there has been no such clear path. Instead, we see only a thin ragged line, rather like a small weakly meandering stream that sometimes disappears into the ground.

This sputtering along of the political process is in sharp contrast to the smooth steep trajectories of other areas of development, notably in the economic area, where growth can only be described in breathless superlatives; and even in those areas where the Government has been traditionally conservative, for instance, education and the arts.

Hence while the winds of change are sweeping everywhere, while the clarion call to be creative, to think outside the box, is heard everywhere, the political domain remains a backwater, with every sign of drying up altogether.

This glaring incongruity has not gone unnoticed. It has led the dispassionate observer, both foreign and local, to qualify every praise of Singapore, no matter how lavish, with a polite 'but', as in:

'Oh yes, Singapore is a model worthy of emulation by other societies but - '; 'Oh yes, I am very proud to be a Singaporean except for this fear thing that is still around, you know what I mean?'

3 pillars of sound governance



The contrast has also led to an embarrassing anomaly. While Singapore is consistently ranked among the top three in global surveys on economic growth, business friendliness and so on, it is placed with North Korea, Myanmar and Iran when it comes to individual or press freedom.

Why is there this continuing government reluctance to open up at a time when it can well afford to do so?

There are three possible reasons. The first is historical continuity. This policy is part of an ongoing and enduring legacy from the Lee



Kuan Yew era of tough rule.

THE Singapore model has three features that are likely to authenticate and legitimate it in the eyes of the global community:

- First, the tight political control is motivated not by megalomania, greed or corruption but their very opposite: a genuine concern for the welfare of the society.
- Second, the method of getting rid of political dissidents is by due process of law or by the simple expedient of marginalising them.
- Third, the sound pragmatism of a model that seeks only solid, practical results surely stands out in a world where ideology and high-sounding ideals have failed to solve problems.

The second reason is strategic. Tight control of even minor political issues means pre-emption of major ones, which, as the Government has always maintained, Singapore cannot afford, with its small size and dependence on the rest of the world to make a living.

The third reason is psychological - a natural distaste of a serious-minded and purposeful leadership for the noise and rowdiness of political debate and dissent.

Here is a government that has made no secret of an almost pathological dislike of polemics, posturing and populist rhetoric.

This aversion to political debate is the reason not only for the Government's continuing reluctance to make any change to its quiescent, inactive state but the reason for the desire to make that state permanent. Such a desire cannot obviously be openly articulated to an increasingly sophisticated and vocal electorate.

So what the Government has been doing quietly is to develop a strategy by which it can simultaneously achieve two objectives that appear to contradict each other: on the one hand, reassuring the electorate through a generous slew of opening-up measures; and on the other, making sure that nothing has changed.

The first objective can be made as overt as possible; the second is necessarily covert.

The result is a dual model of managing political dissent that is unique to the PAP leadership. It comprises both the soft, gentle, consultative approach of the Goh Chok Tong rule and the hard, stern no-nonsense approach of the Lee Kuan Yew rule; the soft approach being at the forefront, open for all to see, and the hard approach being in the background, hardly visible but clearly the prevalent one.

Hence, while the many official channels by which Singaporeans can freely express their views - the Feedback Unit, Speaker's Corner, public forums - are all highly publicised, the warning of stern government action against those who dare abuse the channels by going beyond the out-of-bounds markers is only occasionally uttered, and even then in quick, brief response to direct questions.

These out-of-bound markers have never been clearly spelt out, but continue to operate as a broad metaphor, clearly to allow the Government its own interpretation of what is acceptable and what is not in political discourse.

By now, Singaporeans have a general idea of the permitted scope of criticism. The most readily tolerated is criticism of non-political issues, especially bread-and-butter matters, for example those related to CPF (Central Provident Fund), foreign maids and so on.

The somewhat grudgingly tolerated is criticism of government style, and the least tolerated is criticism of government competence and integrity.

The action taken against the transgressors of these markers has really been no more than a sharp and stern rebuttal of the criticism. But it works because in a small society that has been so long dominated by a powerful, implacable government, even this can create very real fear.

When young people, invited to public forums to speak their minds freely, talk about a still pervading atmosphere of fear, they mean exactly this.

This model is useful to the Government in the handling of criticism because, while the evidence for the soft approach is widespread, tangible and visible, the evidence for the hard approach is just this general sense of fear, hardly definable and thus easily challenged by the Government.

Hence the leaders can point to any number of instances of political opening up, usually supported by examples of the opening up of non-political areas such as the famous bar-top dancing issue, and say: 'Fear? What fear? Look around you, see the many letters in the newspapers criticising the Government. Has anybody gone to jail for that?'

If pressed for a clear statement on how it will deliver on its promise to open up, the Government is apt to respond with a terse assertion that it will not necessarily follow the Western model that young people and journalists seem so enamoured of, but will instead develop its own model.

Overall, this dual model is a very sophisticated strategy of containment, control and manipulation, by

which the Government can have the political cake and eat it too: give every appearance of political freedom but ensure it is not the real thing, and meanwhile, behind the scenes, work at getting rid of it altogether.

Now, getting rid altogether of political dissent is something abhorrent to the free world and the Government is not about to provoke condemnation from a global community to which it is so comfortably, securely and advantageously linked.

But suppose it does the unimaginable, the truly ingenious. Suppose it turns things around and proves to the free world that this very condemnable act can lead to greater stability and prosperity for the society. Suppose it proves that dispensing with a major tenet of democracy can actually save democracy from itself.

The truth is that this is already happening. When the Singapore Government confidently tells inquisitive journalists and critics that it is developing a model of governance that is geared specifically to the needs and aspirations of the people, it is in effect showcasing an alternative to the Western model of democracy. And it is succeeding to the extent that certain experimenting and developing democracies in Asia and Africa that are very anxious to wean or distance themselves from Western prototypes, but still stay within the fold, may look to the Singapore model.

This is not such a far-fetched scenario, for the Singapore model has three features that are likely to authenticate and legitimate it in the eyes of the global community:

- First, tight political control is motivated not by megalomania, greed or corruption but their very opposite: a genuine concern for the welfare of the society. Admittedly, not even the harshest critic of the PAP can doubt its passionate commitment to the nation.
- Second, the method of getting rid of political dissidents is by due process of law or by the simple expedient of marginalising them, a blameless enough method when compared with the brutality so repugnant to the democratic sensibility.
- Third, the sound pragmatism of a model that seeks only solid, practical results surely stands out in a world where ideology and high-sounding ideals have failed to solve problems.

The Singapore Government acts on the conviction that, at the end of the day, what matter most to the people are safety, job security and a peaceful and prosperous life.

Against these primary, urgent imperatives, political freedom is irrelevant or even meaningless. In the insecurity of a world atmosphere created by Sept 11, Sars, terrorism and natural disasters, nobody could agree more.

Indeed, the current high international standing of the Singapore Government is one of the reasons why it is succeeding so well in curbing political dissent at home. For if the world can accord such high praise to the leadership, how can its own people not believe that whatever it is doing must be right and good?

The result is that at no time has the dissident voice been more muted, at no time have political commentators stayed so warily away from the out-of-bounds markers. Political clubs such as the Roundtable have folded up; new ones are not likely to appear. And in an atmosphere of continuing anxiety, there will be continuing self-censorship. The greater the Government's efforts to raise material prosperity, the more irrelevant and even harmful will the role of the political activist be seen.

And as if to push dissidents even more quickly into oblivion, the Government is working hard to win over potential dissidents, chiefly idealistic young people, by embracing two courses traditionally dear to them.

These are freedom of expression in the arts, and humanitarian concern for the underclass. Hence, the Government is going all out to create a lively arts scene by allowing bold experimentation in theatre, dance and movie-making. Similarly, it is going all out to help those left behind by the rapid pace of change, especially the poor and the handicapped.

Winning the battle hands down

THE result is spectacular. By giving buzz to a city once described as a cultural desert, and by putting a human face on a society once described as all head and no heart, the Government has taken over all the battles and cut the ground completely from under the feet of its critics.

It has won hands down. Indeed, it is well on its way to achieving its ideal of the Singapore society - one that will always be governed by a group of responsible, honest, hardworking men and women who will ensure utmost probity among themselves, through continuous self-monitoring and self-renewal.

This perfectly efficient and effective leadership is possible only because it need no longer be bothered by raucous dissidents who, at the least, are like small, pesky dogs yapping at the heels and, at the worst, a cancer on the body politic that has to be excised quickly. In this ideal society, the political engagement of the people is minimal, that is, voting wisely and responsibly once every five years and for the rest of the time cooperating with the Government to attain even greater prosperity.

In a troubled world where so much has gone wrong, the Singapore model may yet be a world model and this time without the qualifying 'but'.

Already, Singapore is being cited as world exemplary on a wide range of achievements, besides its celebrated economic miracle: its quick adaptation to change, its foresight in being among the first to embrace and develop bio-technology, its preparedness in the face of global threats of terrorism and a bird flu pandemic, and its readiness to go to the help of neighbours devastated by natural disasters.

Against such a glowing picture, what I am going to say next will make me a surly wet blanket, a nasty shower of acid rain upon a glorious parade. I firmly believe that a model of governance in which political dissent has little or no role is deeply flawed on two points:

- First, the need for expression can never be suppressed;
- Second, if it is, then it is all the worse for the society.

This need is something natural, inborn, universal, something that defines us uniquely as a species. It has to do with the human sense of self, identity and belonging. It is manifest in all societies, whether full, partial or nascent democracies.

Even in a non-democracy it is not absent; it has simply gone underground and is just waiting for the first chance to surface. It can neither be intimidated into permanent silence nor seduced by material rewards.

It is neither a means nor an end to anything. It simply IS, a force to be reckoned with. Now, if we want to know why, we will have to ask the anthropologist and the evolutionary psychologist who will be able to explain its primordial origins.

Hence, in any society at any time, there will be a small minority of eccentrics, mavericks, rebels and troublemakers, a group certainly not endearing to the government or the majority.

In Singapore, after years of marginalisation, this must be a very, very small group indeed. But it has a crucial role to play. Its dissident voice and contrarian stand are the very yeast to enliven the political dough. Even its unruliness and rambunctiousness are the very genes, though dangerously mutant and rogue, to give new life to a tired species.

Instead of crushing it, the Government should engage it and allow it to play out its role in what ultimately must be a beneficial political education for all. For only through engagement with difference can convictions be strengthened, courage tested and characters moulded. Only in the rough and tumble, the cut and thrust of political battle, can there be the conditions to throw up a political genius who will one day lead the society with vision and courage.

Something akin to these conditions must have thrown up an undisputed visionary and fighter we still have in our midst - Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Obviously, the conditions cannot be replicated, but through a genuine opening up - the operative word is 'genuine' - the Government can create the much-needed environment.

Of course, in the short term, there will be the disruptions and dislocations of major change and adjustment, but the long-term outcome is a very positive one - a mature, fully functioning society in which material prosperity is matched by a robust political life, in which the two are seen as richly complementary.

The alternative is a monolithic, undifferentiated society ever making copies of itself, an inbred society of made-to-order leaders and citizens who will be very vulnerable to the predation of more robust competitors from outside.

I am going to finish my exposition on a shockingly pessimistic note. I have come to believe, with a somewhat heavy heart, that even if the Government wants to do something about the problem, it may be a little too late.

Singaporeans have by now become so dependent on the Government for making decisions for us, for thinking for us, and so used to our comfortable lives, that any major change and adjustment will be viewed with alarm.

Instead of going on with my exposition, I present it in the form of a short story, with the title 'The

Experiment'.

The Experiment

AT THE fourth ministerial meeting to discuss the very troublesome young activist Frankie Mah, Minister Supremo asks: 'Well, what's the latest?' There is a barrage of new information: the young rebel has got bolder; his following has grown; at the Speakers' Corner, he attracts never-before-seen crowds; the Internet is full of excited chatter among young people about how to force the government to give in to the LOD, or the Long Overdue Demand.

'And what's that?' asks Minister Supremo, in his gentle, well-modulated voice. Here, Minister A.H. -- for years the minister has been known only by these initials - says angrily: 'Freedom! Would you believe it? Here are young people free from poverty, squalor, corruption, and they're clamouring for freedom!'

He gives another angry snort. The other ministers try to calm him down.

'How long are you going to tolerate this nonsense?' he asks. 'Listen. I've done some research on the fellow. When he was 16, he cheated in a school exam. When he was 18, he got his girlfriend pregnant. Why don't we use this info...'

'No!' says Minister Supremo firmly. Then he goes on to make the most astonishing announcement: 'I'm going to say 'Yes' to all the demands of Frankie Mah.'

Everyone is astounded. Minister A.H. has fallen off his chair. 'Yes,' says Minister Supremo calmly. 'Frankie Mah is going to get all the freedom he wants.'

The announcement first shocks Singaporeans into speechlessness, then rouses them into a frenzy of rejoicing. At last! At last! Frankie Mah has become a national hero.

In the following days, Singaporeans witness what they had never thought to see in their lifetime. Large crowds carrying placards denouncing the death penalty mass outside Changi Prison. A rambunctious crowd at the Speakers' Corner repeatedly punch the air with their fists, denouncing this or that government policy. A long procession marches down Orchard Road carrying a banner showing a portrait of Frankie Mah under the word 'Revolution'.

'Aren't you going to do anything?' shrieks Minister A.H. 'Yesterday one of them exposed his backside to show an obscene tattoo making fun of the government!'

Minister Supremo lets out a little chuckle. He says reassuringly: 'Don't worry, everything will be all right,' then continues to look outside the window at a crowd gathered under a giant banner bearing a portrait of himself with a Hitler moustache. He listens to Frankie Mah shouting into a megaphone:

'Hey, hey, Pee-Ay-Pee

Best-ever government in his-tor-ree

Please be our government in perpe-tui-tee!'

The other ministers watch uneasily as he lets out another chuckle.

In the third week, things suddenly change. Large, noisy crowds come out to demonstrate not for but against Frankie Mah. They are in fact petitioning the government to stop him. He is disrupting the peace of Singaporean life.

Only the day before, somebody was badly hurt in a scuffle. Before that, a fight had broken out in a mall, and hooligans had taken advantage of the situation to loot. Piles of litter are left wherever his rowdy supporters meet. Such a thing has never before happened in Singapore.

Minister Supremo receives delegations of Singaporeans urging quick government action. The Association of Parents and Teachers complains that the demonstrations are causing students to play truant. The Moral Society complains that the rude, crude behaviour of the rebels is influencing the young. The Tourism Promotion Society worries that all the mayhem will drive away tourists.

But the Minister is unruffled. 'I'm waiting,' he says with serene confidence, adding cryptically: 'It will come.'

And it comes soon enough, on the 37th day of The Experiment. A huge flood of letters in the newspapers and on the Internet, matched by the largest-ever delegation to the government, all voice the greatest, most urgent concern of Singaporeans: 'The value of our property is going down!'

Minister Supremo acts. Minister A.H. is jubilant. 'Throw that scum into jail! Fine him! Cane him!' But

Minister Supremo says: 'No. I'm going to invite him to tea.'

Frankie Mah appears very nervous as he is shown into the Minister's office. As soon as he enters, he sees a huge poster with his portrait and the words:

'Hey, hey, Frank-Kie- Mah

So you thought to have the last hurrah

You just might have gone a little too far!'

Frankie turns deathly pale. Minister Supremo graciously invites him to sit down and have tea and cake. First, the intimidation; then the charm. Frankie is overcome with relief. But he is still a little nervous.

The Minister says affably: 'That famous tattoo. I saw it on TV, but those kiasu MediaCorp people blocked it out. Tell me about it.'

Frankie tells him. The Minister roars with laughter. Frankie is no longer uneasy. In fact, he feels comfortable enough to ask about something he has always wondered about.

'Those initials in Minister A.H.'s name. What do they stand for?'

'Will you promise not to tell anyone if I tell you?' says Minister Supremo.

'Yes, of course,' says Frankie.

'Well,' says Minister Supremo. 'Minister A.H. is a well-meaning chap, but with his outdated ways of thinking, he's become a real pain. The initials stand for a rude word which I won't utter, but it rhymes with 'mass soul' '. Frankie laughs so much he spills his tea.

It is time for him to leave. He is overwhelmed by gratitude. His eyes are shining with joy. From now on, his life will take on a new purpose.

Catherine Lim is a freelance writer. This is excerpted from an address given at the annual seminar of the Institute of Policy Studies last Thursday.

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