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Moving beyond the OB markers:

Rethinking the space of civil society in Singapore

Lenore Lyons and James Gomez

In January 2004, prior to his appointment as Singapore's third Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong gave a landmark speech to the Harvard Club of Singapore in which he outlined a new style of state-society relations. Claiming that "I have no doubt that our society must open up further", Lee emphasized that one of the important tasks facing the government was to "promote further civic participation, and continue to progressively widen the limits of openness" (Lee 2004). In his comments, Lee sought to signal a break between the ruling style of former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, and himself.[1] In light of Lee Hsien Loong's claims that under his leadership Singapore will experience greater 'openness', it is timely to reflect back on the nature of civil society under his predecessor. This collection of paper contributes to that understanding by bringing together a diverse number of case studies of civil society activism in Singapore during the latter years of Goh Chok Tong's rule. By drawing on in-depth research of non-government organizations (NGOs) and other civil society actors, these papers not only provide nuanced understandings of specific organizations and activist groups, but also broaden the terms of scholarly debate about the nature of state-civil society relations in Singapore.

Civil society in Singapore

[1] That he chose the contentious arena of civil society as the space in which to distinguish himself from his predecessor is not remarkable. Goh Chok Tong did a very similar thing when he came to power in 1990 (see Lee's "Gestural Politics", in this issue).

Civil society in Singapore has been the source of considerable scholarly interest. Much of this work has focused on the dominant role played by the ruling elite of the People's Action Party (PAP) in both opening up and closing down spaces for civil society engagement (see for example Chua 1995, 2000; Rodan 1996). Numerous writers have documented the political repression and authoritarianism of the Singapore state (see Rodan 1993, 1996; Haas 1989; Khong 1995; Singh 1992). This has led some commentators to conclude that despite a parliament modelled on Westminster-style democracy, the PAP has effectively restricted the growth of a participatory parliamentary system, and instead fostered a 'mass society' characterised by a lack of political institutions between the state and the people; that is, that Singapore lacks an effective 'civil society' (Haas 1989; Tamney 1996). More recently, Garry Rodan (2003, p.505) has argued that Singapore exhibits 'civil society forces' rather than genuine civil society.

Many scholars agree, however, that civil society in Singapore is largely a state-sanctioned sphere of engagement that has emerged in response to middle class pressure for greater political liberalisation (Brown and Jones 1995; Koh and Ooi 2000; Rodan 1996). Goh Chok Tong's period as Prime Minister is characterised by an easing of overt forms of social and political control in favour a model of consensus and consultation (Tanaka 2002). In these accounts, the space of civil society is described as an arena that is shaped by the state, and in which the state constantly intervenes. Considerable attention, therefore, has been given to the discourses surrounding the PAP's terms of engagement – civic versus civil society, the 'pruning of the banyan tree', and the 'OB markers' (see Chua 2003; Koh and Ooi 2004; Lee 2002).

These accounts of civil society in Singapore are very much dominated by the work of academic scholars located in Singapore and elsewhere. Few of these scholars have been openly reflexive about their own 'situatedness' in these debates. Many are employed in state-supported institutions, including educational institutions in which concepts of 'academic freedom' are strongly mediated

by practical considerations about tenure and promotion. Significant numbers of these scholars are also closely involved with NGOs and other civil society groups, thus blurring the line between academic and activist arenas. Failure to engage with a politics of location (and the associated politics of speech) has meant that there are few critical attempts to challenge hegemonic discourse about civil society in Singapore.

One outcome of this silence is that there is a tendency within the literature to project a romance of 'more' civil society as ballast against coercive state power and its excesses. Not only does this overlook the complexity of state-society relations, but there is also a propensity to "obscure the great diversity of social and political elements in civil society in favour of a general championing of civil society per se" (Rodan 1997, p.162). In promoting the need for 'more' civil society, such accounts fail to question the intersection between unequal power relations found in other social spheres and power relations within civil society. Third world feminists have long pointed out that there is nothing inherently progressive about civil society – it may be as deeply masculinist (and thus antithetical to the cause of women's rights) as the more formalised networks of power located within the state (Rai, 1996). In other words, coupling democratisation with the expansion of civil society fails to question whether indeed 'more' civil society is a good thing. At the same time, these often upbeat accounts of civil society's gains need to be tempered with a realisation that civil society in Singapore is largely a failed project.

Another second important limitation of current scholarship on civil society in Singapore is that publications by activists themselves are often ignored. There is a vast volume of published work by civil society actors, including books, edited collections of essays, published conference proceedings, histories and pictorial collections, and articles in the Singaporean print media; as well as unpublished reports and manuscripts. While not all of these publications critically engage with

the concept of civil society[2], many provide important insights in the issues facing civil society actors in their day-to-day activities.[3] Closer attention to work published by of NGOs and other activists reveals a much more dynamic account of civil society than the PAP/state-centric accounts that predominate in scholarly discussions.

Most importantly, although most scholarly accounts make reference to prominent NGOs in their discussions of civil society, we know very little about how NGOs or voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) actually work.[4] There are few detailed ethnographic studies of specific organisations.[5] This leads to a tendency to treat civil society as a homogeneous space characterised by two consistent forms of state-civil society interaction – a collaborative model of civic participation dominated by VWOs, and a more tenuous, marginalized sector dominated by independent NGOs (Chua 2000). Much of this discussion has focused on the meanings associated with the terms 'civic' and 'civil' society, as they are used by both the PAP elite and in scholarly discourse. Although some recent work has suggested that these two ideal types more closely represent different ends of a spectrum of civil society engagement (Koh and Ooi 2004, p.173), little attention has been given to the life-histories of these groups as well as changes in the ways that they engage with the state over time. This has led to a tendency to overlook the significant achievements of such groups on the basis that they merely provide a "forum for alternative voices rather than action or change" (Birch and Phillips 2003) and are thus in danger of becoming 'junior partners' (Chua 2003).

It is commonly asserted that civil society actors self-regulate their behaviour and that this acts as an effective means of state control (Lyons 2000). Closer attention to the actual workings of NGOs,

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[2] See for example Gomez (2002), Singam et al. (2002), Tan and Ng (2004).
[3] See for example Thenmoli (2000).
[4] It is unfortunate that the rich diversity of civil society in Singapore is obscured by constant reference in academic publications to three organizations – AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research); the Nature Society of Singapore; and the AMP (Association of Muslim Professionals).
[5] See Lyons (2004) for a study of AWARE.

VWOs and other civil society actors would reveal the extent to which self-regulation is actually practised by these groups. It would also reveal the ways in which civil society actors themselves define who becomes a legitimate player within the field (and thus their chance at success within the state's cooperative framework), as well as the nature of internal interactions between civil society actors. Similarly, there are few accounts that examine the very real problems of being involved in civil society in terms of professional and personal cost to individuals. We need studies that examine the modes of operation, tactics and strategies of organisations, as well as the fears and anxieties of civil society actors.

A third problem with studies of civil society in Singapore is that they tend to focus on the nature of state-civil society relations, and overlook the ways in which civil society intersects with other spheres, including most importantly the family and the economy. Failure to consider the nature of family-civil society relations leads to a tendency to overlook the gendered dimensions of civil society.[6] Feminist scholars have pointed out that the dualism of state and civil society is sometimes used interchangeably with the public/private distinction, such that family/kinship relations are described as a space within the wider non-government sphere (i.e. civil society). Maila Stivens (1990, p.103) describes this as a place of "strange emptiness … where the state takes a hands-off approach". In the case of Singapore, as numerous studies of the family and population policy demonstrate, this clearly is not the case (see PuruShotam 1992). Despite the significant role performed by women's organisations such as AWARE and the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO), as well as groups concerned with the needs of families (e.g. Society Against Family Violence), few studies have explored the intersection between the family and civil society (but see PuruShotam 1998). Similarly, although civil society is often touted as tool of the

[6] See Kenneth Paul Tan (2001) for one of the few studies to examine this issue.

developmental state, there are few studies which explore the other ways in which the economy intersects/interacts with civil society.

Another weakness in many of the existing studies is that they tend to limit their discussions on civil society in Singapore to only Singapore. Hence, Singaporean civil society is often discussed as if it has no connections to regional and international networks and organizations. This neglect of the regional and international is in part due to the PAP government's attempt to isolate local civil society from 'foreign' influences. It is also in part due to local civil society staying consciously away from regional and international networks for fear of risking repercussions from the state. However, the reality is that globalization has led to a range of transnational forces from which neither the Singaporean economy, nor the sphere of civil society, is immune. Thus, unlike many previous studies, the accounts in this collection look beyond the boundaries of the nation-state in their analysis of civil society and provide the reader a contemporary reality of these regional and international networks. The papers in this volume critique the narrow definition of civil society employed by the PAP as well as some researchers and include in their analysis global environmentalism, transnational labour migration, international human rights discourses, and the increasing presence of tourists and other non-citizens in Singapore.

The collection of papers produced in this issue of *Sojourn* address many of these limitations by providing in-depth analyses of NGOs and other groups. Among the issues that they explore are: How are the problems faced by civil society actors played out in actual campaigns? What are the roles played by the government and its agents; intellectuals; civil society elites; religious groups; media; international agencies; and non-resident citizens in shaping the sphere of civil society? How do dominant ideologies and cultural forces influence campaigns and decision-making? Importantly, through their analysis, these papers seek to make an assessment about the success of civil society activism in Singapore.

Singapore Studies Project

This collection of papers emerged out of the Singapore Studies Project initiated in 2004 at the Monash Asia Institute (Melbourne, Australia) as part of its postgraduate research program to encourage doctoral students, with the mentoring of senior scholars, to publish whilst completing their theses. It was recognised that within the general rubric of Southeast Asian studies, Singapore has often been under-represented as a specific target of investigation. Singapore remains a critical player in the social, economic and political stability of the Asia-Pacific. The Singapore Studies Project was designed to recognise that role, and to stimulate debate and discussion about Singapore's future at a time when the country's dominance as a regional hub is being contested by its nearest neighbours. More specifically, the aims and objectives of the Singapore Studies Project were to 1) promote research on Singapore, especially about the neglected aspects of Singapore's recent history; 2) publish relevant monographs and discussion papers; 3) encourage senior and junior researchers to work together and share ideas; and 4) facilitate institutional partnerships.

As a starting point for the project, it was noted that democracy in Singapore has often been described as a difficult exercise. In fact many observers have concluded that the island city-state is an illiberal democracy that exercises stringent control over political expression. A variety of laws and regulations that place restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and association are often cited as examples of this. Yet despite such constraints, a variety of alternative political and social expressions do take place in Singapore. This has led some observers to conclude that contesting the nature of this illiberal democracy in the short to mid-term is likely to take place in the realm of civil society. In fact many are inclined to claim that civil society, rather than electoral politics, will be the site for democratic growth.

In order to evaluate this claim, a set of workshops entitled the *Singapore Studies Workshop Series* were initiated with Monash University doctoral candidate James Gomez appointed as coordinator. The first activity was hosted by the Monash Asia Institute (MAI) with Professor Marika Vicziany, the Director of MAI, as advisor. The event was held on 10 May 2004 and was entitled "Politics and Civil Society in Singapore". The second workshop was held in partnership with the School of Applied Communication (Asian Media and Culture) at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), with Chris Hudson as advisor. The workshop was held on 9 August 2004 and was entitled "Celebrating Singapore: Identity, Ethnicity, Nationalism and Civil Society". The Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformation Studies (CAPSTRANS) at University of Wollongong hosted the third instalment on the 22 October 2004. The project advisor for this leg of the workshop was CAPSTRANS Director, Dr. Lenore Lyons, and the meeting was titled, "Handing over the rei(g)ns: Civil society under Lee Hsien Loong".

Participation at the *Singapore Studies Workshop Series* was largely by invitation. The objective was to bring together a wide range of perspectives from different researchers and to encourage networking amongst them. All three meetings brought together senior and junior scholars working on Singapore both in Australia and abroad. As the project developed other post-graduate students and scholars working on Singapore signed up via email to participate in writing projects that might emerge from the process. The papers that form this special *Sojourn* collection form the first publication outcome from the series.

The Papers

Five papers from the Singapore Studies Workshop Series have been selected for inclusion in this edition of *Sojourn*. In addition to these articles, Terence Chong from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) has kindly agreed to act as discussant on the articles. His piece appears at the end of the collection.

The collection begins with an article by Terence Lee ("Gestural Politics") that provides a brief overview of the evolution of the PAP's public statements about civil society since the 1990s, from early articulations of 'civic society' to the more recent language of 'active citizenry'. Lee argues that the language of 'openness' and 'inclusiveness', are necessary to ensure that the state remains connected and knowledgeable about global social movements as well as appease and appeal to Singaporeans who want greater political voice via non-political social/interest groups. Lee Hsien Loong's comments about 'new Singapore' thus form part of a consistent 'gestural politics' rather than a shift in the way that the state actually governs. In other words, they are part of a strategy designed to ensure the PAP government's continued legitimacy and longevity. This paper provides a useful introduction to the collection by providing the historical and discursive context for the later articles.

In her article, "Considering 'green' practices", Kersty Hobson problematises the idea of PAP hegemony and is critical of *a priori* theorizations of governance in Singapore. Calling for studies that explore the discursive and bodily practices of political actors, Hobson argues that we should interpret the concept of 'active citizenry' as further evidence that the state is in fact a 'work-in-progress'. Drawing on a study of the Green Volunteer Network (GVN) she argues that practices that at first appear in keeping with state discourses are embodied attempts to forge a different Singapore. Her analysis demonstrates the ways in which global environmental discourses, combined with fundamental support for the state's role, intersect in shaping collaborative activities between the state and civil society actors. At the same time, she draws attention to factionalism within the environmental movement and the unwillingness of different groups to forge alliances.

In the next piece on "International NGOs", James Gomez calls for greater consideration to be given to the role played by external groups, such as international agencies, on the operation of local civil

society. Gomez questions the boundedness of civil society and asks: what happens if we look beyond the physical boundaries of the nation when examining civil society activism? He argues that human rights and media advocacy reports produced by international agencies not only create awareness of transgressions in the international community as well as in Singapore, but in the absence of local media watch initiatives, become an extension of local civil society activism. This role has been largely facilitated by the expansion of the Internet in Singapore since the mid-1990s. Gomez concludes, however, by arguing that while these groups fill an important gap they cannot replace the need for Singaporean-based activism.

Lenore Lyons builds on the theme of globalization explored in the early articles in her piece titled "Transient Workers Count Too?". She asks: if civil society is a space occupied by 'active citizens', what opportunities do Singaporean activists have to focus their attention on the rights of non-citizens? Drawing on an in-depth analysis of the informal network 'The Working Committee 2' (TWC2), which has as the focus of its interest the rights of migrant workers living in Singapore, Lyons explores the intersection between gender, citizenship and transnationalism. Extending her analysis beyond the realm of state-civil society relations, she argues that civil society replicates many of the gendered discourses present within the sphere of the family. She concludes by arguing that while the TWC2's campaigns were creative and achieved many important gains for migrant domestic workers, ultimately the TWC2 did not challenge the view that civil society is a space occupied by concerned citizens working to improve Singaporean society.

The final article in the collection, "State-civil society relations and Tourism", Ooi Can Seng examines another group of non-citizens who play a significant role in Singapore's continued economic growth – international tourists. Ooi explores the intersection between the economy and civil society through an analysis of the state-sponsored Singapore Tourism Board (STB). His analysis brings to light the ways in which the developmentalist state's economic imperatives shape

the space of civil society. Tourism has been under-explored in the analysis of civil society in Singapore, and yet, as Ooi argues, annual tourist numbers are double the size of the resident population. He argues the state, via the STB, has been able to absorb civil spaces, redefine cultural spaces and identities, and in some instances open up civil society and the economy for reasons of tourism. Arguing that tourists have become *de facto* constituents, Ooi concludes by suggesting that tourists are 'Singaporeanized' at the same time that Singapore is 'touristified'.

This collection of articles extends the analysis of civil society in Singapore beyond the ubiquitous reference to 'OB markers' (areas where civil society activists dare not venture because they are deemed too politically sensitive and thus 'out-of-bounds'), and focuses instead on the complexities and ambiguities surrounding state-civil society interaction. This is the first collection to bring together sustained, qualitative analysis of NGOs and other civil society actors. The authors not only challenge us to look beyond the PAP and the boundaries of the nation-state when exploring civil society in Singapore, but also to explore the ways in which civil society intersects with other non-state spheres, including the family and the economy. The analyses contained within these papers dismiss the claim examined by the *Singapore Studies Workshop Series* that democratic contestation has taken place within the realm of civil society. While their collective assessment of civil society under Goh Chok Tong is not positive, the papers nonetheless provides a highly nuanced understanding of the constraints faced by civil society activists, and remain supportive of the important gains achieved by many groups. As Singaporeans embark on a new political era under Lee Hsien Loong, the authors provide a timely reminder that any assessment of 'greater openness' requires sustained attention to the recent past.

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