

Unsuited to Asians? – Democracy in Singapore

by Chee Soon Juan

Ten years ago, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong set Singaporean hearts a-flutter when he borrowed an American president's phrase and promised a "kinder and gentler" style of government, one that would be "more consultative." Unfortunately, the current absence of democracy and civil society in Singapore reveals that Goh's promise was more form than substance.

Singapore provides an important example to democracies in transition and the world for two reasons. First, it illustrates the critical role of civil society in a true democracy. Second, the Singapore regime offers its authoritarian system as a model of sorts and some developing countries naively embrace it. China, for instance, sees Singapore's system as proof it can encourage modernization while maintaining its totalitarian grip on the people. If democrats in Asia as well as those around the world are not vigilant, the "Asian values" propaganda, whose most enthusiastic and artful proponent is former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, will spread. Those who support this "Asian values" idea argue that democracy and human rights are Western concepts unsuited to Asians, an idea that has held back the development of democracy in the region. Of course, this argument has been roundly debunked by political events taking place in Asian societies such as Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Indonesia.

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In Singapore, major pieces of legislation that impede the development of civil society remain entrenched, such as the Internal Security Act, which allows the detention of citizens without trial. People who wish to meet regularly for a specific purpose must still register with the authorities, and the police continue to insist that anyone wishing to speak in a public place must apply for a permit – permits that, they concede, will not be granted.

In addition, political actors that could build civil society in Singapore are silenced or co-opted by the ruling party. Opposition leaders continue to be taken to court by government officials in financially ruinous lawsuits, and television and radio stations as well as every newspaper in the country exist at the



pleasure of government. Trade unions are told that they are better served by a cabinet minister as their leader.

After nearly half a century of one-party control, Singaporeans have become resentful but remain fearful. One survey conducted by the country's main morning news daily found that 80 percent of Singaporeans "felt strongly that the Government was not willing to listen and consider differing views." Another reported that 93 percent of Singaporeans were afraid to speak out even if they disagreed with government policies. Without free speech and assembly, a free and pluralistic media, and genuine free and fair elections, civil society will remain at the mercy of the government.

As bleak as the political future for Singapore is, however, I remain hopeful that reforms can occur. For this to happen, the international community must pay greater attention to the plight of civil society in the island-republic. It would be a grave mistake to interpret the lack of an organized, energetic civil society in Singapore as acceptance on the part of its citizens or, worse, as a rejection of democratic values. The above-mentioned surveys point to the contrary. The lack of a vibrant civil society is a testament only to the efficiency and thoroughness of the Singapore government's authoritarian style.

Democratic governments around the world should not hesitate to admonish their Singaporean counterpart for paying lip service to democracy while continuing to practice autocracy. International organizations concerned with elections can help by exposing the sophisticated ways in which the ruling party manipulates elections. Concurrently, Singaporean activists must explore ways of breaking the government's control of the mass media.

Before the end of this year, the prime ministership will transfer from Goh Chok Tong to Lee Kuan Yew's son, Lee Hsien Loong. Without concerted action by Singaporeans and assistance from the international community, the rule of Goh's successor will be just as "gentle" and "kind" as that under Goh – or perhaps even more so.

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