THE POLITICS OF CIVIL SOCIETY 
IN SINGAPORE

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We are bound together by the Singapore idea but it is not easy to define what exactly constitutes it. It involves both the heart and the mind, and probably includes aspects like good governance, civic responsibility, honesty, strong families, hard work, a spirit of voluntarism, the use of many languages and a deep respect for racial and religious diversity. George Yeo, as Singapore’s Minister of Information and the Arts (Yeo 2000, 25).

INTRODUCTION

In June 1991, the concept of civic society was promulgated in Singapore by George Yeo, who was then the Acting Minister of Information and the Arts.² Yeo made his—and indeed Singapore’s—seminal speech on civic society to suggest a need for Singaporeans as citizens to be actively involved not so much in parliamentary or lobbyist politics, but in creating a “Singapore soul”, which was marked by a deep emotional attachment to Singapore (Yeo 1991, 2–3).³ Yeo’s intention was to urge Singaporeans to enhance the civic life in/of Singapore so that Singaporeans would treat the country as home, rather than as a hotel where people can come and go as they please. The rhetoric of “home” is a familiar one in Singapore, with a close affinity to the ideals of national/cultural identity and nation-building (Koh 1998, 12; Tamney 1996).

Minister Yeo’s call for Singapore to embrace civic society is significant for two key reasons: first of all, the government itself was issuing a call for a participatory civic society that closely resembled what has become known as “civil society”; and secondly, and of particular interest here, Yeo used the term “civic society” to confront issues pertaining to forging a unitary national identity and culture, or in other words, creating an aura of “togetherness” (Singapore 21 Committee 1999). Yeo, widely regarded as one of Singapore’s most eloquent politicians, carefully referred to civic society as that space (to be) filled by the family upon the “pulling back” of the state, and not the space between an individual or non-
governmental body and the state, as the notion of civil society would commonly connote. Invoking the concept of the family as dichotomously opposed to the state seems a judicious choice, given that one of Singapore’s best-remembered notions of shared Asian values emphasises the family as “the basic unit of society” (White Paper 1990). Civic society thus takes on a metaphorical dimension, becoming a signifier of the familial home as city/nation/state—in Singapore, these entities are often coalesced into a single unit (see Kwok and Chua 1999)—and as the place where one ought to plant his/her cultural roots.

In May 1998, a conference with the theme ‘Civil society: Harnessing state–society synergies’ was organised by Singapore’s Institute of Policy Studies, a fully government-funded public policy think-tank, to revisit the civic and/or civil society issue (see Koh and Ooi 2000). It was no coincidence that Minister Yeo was invited to deliver the keynote address. In his speech, as spelt out in the opening quote of this paper, Yeo put forth what he terms “the Singapore idea” (Yeo 2000, 25). The gist of “the Singapore idea”, and his message, was summarised in his concluding lines as follows:

It is hoped that [this conference on] civil society in Singapore will stimulate thought on defining more precisely the Singapore idea, and on finding new and better ways to bind state and society together. For it is in working together that we optimize our position in the world. In the web world, the state is not completely above society. Both exist together drawing strength from each other (Yeo 2000, 26, emphasis added).

The “Singapore idea” is thus an update, even an improvement, on the earlier “Singapore soul” concept. It is a term that has much to do with the reinforcement of past and existing cultural policies of control and the maintenance of authority; yet it is a term that eludes precise definition, as it seems to encompass all Singaporean communities, both state and non-state.

In other words, Yeo’s vision of the “Singapore idea” suggests a civic-minded, harmonious society that embraces the founding principles of Singapore culture—the “4Ms” (multiracialism, multiculturalism, multilingualism and multireligiosity), the much-vaulted Asian or shared values discourse, the five pillars of the Singapore 21 vision statement (to be discussed later in this paper), and all other governmental or government-endorsed policies. Significantly, Yeo makes a conceptual departure from his original (1991) speech on “civic society” by emphasising that the idea of civil society involves enhancing the relationship between state and non-state. To Yeo, the non-state aspect is best understood as the realm of civil society.

At this juncture one could ask how the term “civic society” became conflated—or perhaps confused—with the term “civil society” within a mere seven years? In
an interview with Singapore’s Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP)—a group that epitomises civil society insofar as the phrase is taken to refer to a truly non-governmental organisation that aims to engage in debates on policy issues with the government of the day—Yeo made no apology for using the terms “civic” and “civil” society interchangeably, arguing that it is everyone’s prerogative to use these terms for their purpose/s (Yeo 1999, 12). As Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat cautions, though:

[T]he difference between the two terms, ‘civic society’ and ‘civil society’ is not some inconsequential play of words, but an indication of one’s political stance on the appropriate balance in the relationship between state and society in Singapore (Chua 2000, 63).

Since the task of finding an “appropriate balance”, especially in regard to terms within the political realm, is often an elusive political discourse (Rodan 1996a/b; 2000), it is perhaps useful to adopt Yeo’s separate exhortation of civic society vis-à-vis civil society as a delineation of the concept of civil society in Singapore. If so, civil society would refer to “political” activity, meaning participation in governmental policy and decision-making; while civic society would refer to the socio-cultural aspects of civility, including the typically Singaporean public discourses of courtesy, graciousness and politeness.

Given the heavy political baggage often associated with the language of civil society, the question of whether the Singapore government’s willingness to engage in discussions of such a political nature is driven by uncontrollable circumstances, or is a wisely calculated move, needs to be explored further. To broach this and related questions, this paper examines the Singapore government’s political stance and rationale for embracing the “Singapore idea” of civil society. Although it will focus largely on what I shall call the “gestural politics” of civil society vis-à-vis active citizenship and political participation, the paper’s overall aim is to make sense of how the premise has been, is, and will be employed by the Singapore government (the state) and the citizenry (the essence of civil society). In so doing, this paper hopes to throw some light upon the complex workings of culture, politics and citizenship in contemporary Singapore.

**CIVILISING SINGAPORE: COURTESY AS CIVIL SOCIETY**

The discourse of civic society in Singapore, which stresses the positive attributes of civility, kindness and public orderliness, is not overtly problematic in a political sense. In fact, with its direct emphases on civic responsibility, honesty, a spirit of voluntarism, and respect for racial and religious diversity and harmony, it
echoes very strongly what George Yeo terms “the Singapore idea” in the opening quote to this paper. Furthermore, Singapore’s “courtesy” agenda is a welcome contribution to a vast literature on how to attain a refined and gracious society, especially in a city notoriously ridden with rules and regulations. Certainly, many forms of civilised society have been advocated throughout history, from Plato’s *Republic* to Moore’s *Utopia* to Confucius’ depiction of *Great Harmony* in which he describes an ideal society (see Hsing 1993, x–xi).

Civic society in Singapore is well illustrated and exemplified by the annual Courtesy Campaign that was initiated in 1979 by then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who was interested in forging a “cultivated society”. The first campaign slogan, ‘Make Courtesy Our Way of Life’, encouraged civil servants to be polite to the public. Since then, and with each new slogan, the campaigns have targeted issues such as poor neighbourliness (1982), irritable bus and taxi drivers (1992), and more recently, inconsiderate mobile phone users (1998, and again in 2000) (Singapore Courtesy Council 1999, 11–12). In 1996, incumbent Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong reinforced Singapore’s attempt to “civilise” society by launching the pilot Singapore Kindness Movement, which aimed to encourage young Singaporeans to do a good deed every day. There is certainly no lack of paternalism or moral guidance in the Singapore landscape.

To keep up with the changing times and to promote Internet etiquette (netiquette) in cyberspace—which is perceived by many as ungovernable—the Singapore Courtesy Council launched its website in 1998. Judging by the plethora of initiatives on aspects of civility and graciousness since the commencement of the Courtesy Campaign in 1979—which aimed to produce a highly cultivated, and therefore civic, society—it is evident that more innovative ways of promoting such positive behavioural characteristics will continue to be employed. Although state leaders and event organisers inevitably speak fondly of the usefulness of the many campaigns and movements, their actual success in moulding civilised and civic-minded citizens is a moot point. One thing, however, is clear: Lee Kuan Yew has stated unequivocally that the Courtesy Campaign—like the rule of Singapore’s People’s Action Party (PAP) Government—“is a marathon with no finishing line” (Lee 1994, cited in Singapore Courtesy Council 1999, 21).

The Singaporean campaign for courtesy, while apparently socially and culturally focused in its attempt to inculcate civility in thought and behaviour, also serves a political purpose in helping Singaporean citizens to “imagine” Singapore as their beloved nation (*a la* Benedict Anderson’s well-known 1983 thesis). As Minister George Yeo reveals most succinctly:

> The Courtesy Campaign helps us to build a Singapore nation. We inherited from the British a Singapore that prospered as a trading post but had no sense of nationhood. With independence, our goal must be to create
a sense of oneness among the diverse groups that live here. Part of the glue is proper behaviour which courtesy expresses […] While our strategic objective to promote courtesy is fixed, our tactics must be constantly refreshed (Yeo, cited in Singapore Courtesy Council 1999, 113).

With its emphasis on “proper behaviour” to achieve “a sense of oneness”, the discourse of courtesy is arguably one of many tools created to define the scope of citizenship, identity and nationhood in Singapore. More importantly, it enables the authorities to remain creative in conjuring the techniques and “tactics” of government. Although Yeo’s reference to the constant refreshing of “tactics” is made in the context of the annual Courtesy Campaign, it is conceptually and analytically useful for the coming sections of this paper. Like a polite or courteous “civic” society, civil society needs to be defined and understood in relation to the culture and politics of the nation or society in question.

**CULTIVATING CIVIL SOCIETY IN SINGAPORE**

[A] prince must have the friendship of the common people; otherwise he will have no support in times of adversity […] And, a wise prince should think of a method by which his citizens, at all times and every circumstance, will need the assistance of the state and of himself; and then they will always be loyal to him (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1979, 35–36).

In many parts of Asia, as elsewhere around the world, the revival of interest in civil society as both an analytical concept and a social revitalisation program has much to do with the end of the Cold War, the virtual eradication of communist threats, and the beginnings of a global transition from authoritarianism to democracy that is closely aligned with the embrace of a free market economy (Katz 1998; Hewison and Rodan 1996). The emergence of civil society in Asia has also coincided with transformations brought about by rapid modernisation, the rise of a “new rich” middle class with its demands for greater political participation and transparency (Robison and Goodman 1996), and the advent of the information economy, a project that is being re-ignited as Asian economies recover from the financial crisis of 1997–99.

When state authorities, political actors and the general public speak of civil society in government-made Singapore, though, chances are that they are referring to an orderly “civic society”, or to the non-state sphere of “civil society”, or perhaps to an uneasy combination of both. The ambivalence and confusion, if any, is dismissed even “de-politicised” by Minister George Yeo in the opening
quotation because the concept of “civil society” to him is really a challenge for Singapore’s state and society to “bind”, “optimise” and “exist together”. In other words, civil society is not just about citizenship in the form of voting rights and the right to carry a Singapore passport, but about emotional and ideological attachment to Singapore. To be sure, every discourse on civic and/or civil society in Singapore is highly politicised, for the act of “de-politicisation”, if at all possible, is always/already political.

The political dimension of civil society, as it has evolved in Singapore and as noted in the opening section of this paper, promises opportunities for citizens to become stakeholders in and joint owners of the social, cultural and economic milieu of the country (Koh and Ooi 2000, 13). Academic Koh Tai Ann (1998) suggests that Singapore’s model of civic society seeks primarily to forestall the potentially destabilising “politicking” practices of civil society. One novel way to divert attention from “politicking” is to emphasise the term “civic”, for it spells out how citizens ought to behave and conduct themselves in the public domain, as discussed earlier. This strategy is undoubtedly elemental, but it is most practicable. The “trick” is to keep citizens occupied with activities that are deemed civic, “cultured” and civilised so that they will keep a safe distance from real political activities such as political lobbying, protests, campaigning, and even politically-induced violence. After all, the attainment of a gracious and cultivated (and) civic society appears to be the preferred reading of what a “civic” version of civil society might mean in Singapore. As Chua discloses:

[Civic society] is preferred by the government for its emphasis on the “civic” responsibilities of citizens as opposed to that of the ‘rights’ of citizenship emphasized in the conventional understanding of the concept of “civil society”. This shift of emphasis is consistent with the PAP’s language of politics (Chua 2000, 63).

Notwithstanding this preference for a civic citizenry based on responsibilities rather than on human agency and rights, the emergent Singapore idea of civic/civil society retains a strong affinity with issues of democracy, culture, politics and governance (Jones 1998; Rodan 1996). The very employment of a “language of politics” by the ruling PAP party to describe both civic and civil society makes the entire discourse deeply political. Even Minister Yeo himself concedes that the political dimension is present whether one talks of civic or civil society; it is after all part and parcel of culture and everyday life (Yeo 1999, 12; see also Kumar 1993, 382–83).

Like most aspects of politics and culture in Singapore, civic or civil society has its own “special meanings”, which can only be explained and interpreted by the ruling PAP government (Yao 1996; Lee and Birch 2000). Whether or not citizens
of the island state comprehend the Singapore idea is of little relevance; the fact that its influence remains highly pervasive renders civil society, or any other political discourse, most pertinent. This is because the cryptic notion of the “Singapore idea”, like the ambivalent and hybrid East/West cultural set-up of Singapore, represents the ideal-typical version (à la Weber’s Idealtyp category) of civic/civil society that the Singapore government hopes to shape with the active participation of every citizen (Keane 1998, 6–7). Yet, as Chua points out, the shape of this “Singapore idea”, marked by a “new relationship” between the PAP government and the citizenry, is unclear, with the process of negotiation between what he considers the “two partners in governance” remaining in constant flux (Chua 2000, 65).

To Chua, such semantic and conceptual ambiguities are useful for political praxis as they accord negotiating room for both parties within the state–civil society “partnership” paradigm. It is certainly politically expedient to couch state–civil society relations as a strategic business-like “partnership” rather than a “great dichotomy” (Bobbio 1989). However, Chua fails to point out that negotiations have a tendency to be carried out inequitably and with a strong bias towards the more powerful “partner”. It would certainly be ideal if the moulding of this new “civil society” paradigm were carried out equitably around a “round table”, for it would demonstrate the strengths of a dialogic and participatory civil society. Yet this is precisely what is lacking in the Singaporean discourse of civil society. Basically, civil society groups in Singapore are not sufficiently autonomous for debates to be deemed dialogic. For this reason, a high-profile non-partisan policy discussion and civil society advocate group has adopted the name “The Roundtable” to illustrate the need for a more amicable and transparent relationship between the state and society.7

The likelihood of a truly dialogic and participatory civil society materialising in Singapore, however, remains questionable. This can be attributed, among other things, to an extremely low rate of political participation, especially in terms of public feedback. From a “civic” perspective, citizens tend to exhibit a general unwillingness to sign up as members of (civil society) interest groups or to perform volunteer social work (Chiang 2000, 191–93).8 Indeed, much has been said about how the Singapore polity resonates with a climate of fear, which gives rise to the prevalent practice of self-censorship (Gomez 2000; Tremewan 1994), to the extent that many avoid or even vilify participation in activities that are held in the public sphere. After all, most Singaporeans are well aware of their “rightful” place in a society that demands utility via docility (a la Foucault 1977). As Singaporean political scientist Ho Khai Leong suggests:

[T]he extent to which Singapore’s citizens can influence policy making depends on the extent to which the PAP allows it to happen. The basic
ground rules are set from above and citizenry is merely passively reacting to those regulations (Ho 2000, 447).

Ho’s statement represents a popular (mis)conception of Singapore. To say that the Singaporean citizenry is “merely passive” to government actions and regulations is, I would argue, too simplistic and reductive. Not only does it dismiss the possibility of a civic and/or civil society, it also negates efforts to open up new spaces for different levels of political participation, whether these are passive or active.

The early work of Carole Pateman, better known for her groundbreaking feminist work *The Sexual Contract* (1988), stresses political participation as a foundation of democracy (Pateman 1970). Political scientists often make distinctions between passive and active participation in politics, the former referring to those who are generally well informed about public affairs (usually via the mass media), and the latter to a range of political “activities”. “Active” participation, for most people, is restricted to voting in elections, whether this is compulsory or voluntary. For a minority, it also involves joining civic and/or political organisations and voicing grievances directly to authority figures and government bodies (Painter 1992, 21–22; see also Richardson 1983). While it might appear that only members of the more vocal group are “active citizens”, I would argue that political participation necessarily involves both the vociferous and the muted. Political participation, whether active or passive, is an “activity” of immense importance and consequence. Those who choose not to vocalise their thoughts on a particular policy issue are, in effect, registering their acquiescence in a less confrontational manner. As Pateman points out, “participation must be participation in something”, meaning that one is either a participant in the role and method of decision-making or a recipient who “participates” in a decision that has already been made (Pateman 1970, 68).

Rather than dwelling on the dichotomy between active and passive participation, I suggest that a more fruitful approach is to look at Pateman’s (1970) establishment of three different levels of participation: “pseudo”, “partial” and “full” participation. The first, *pseudo* participation, is restricted to such processes as informing about and endorsement of a pre-determined decision. In this model, no participation in decision-making actually takes place; rather, a feeling of participation is created using what Pateman calls “a technique of persuasion” (Pateman 1970, 69). In the current context, persuasive techniques could fall under the umbrella of public relations management and practice. The second approach, of *partial* participation, gives the participant some opportunities for exercising influence, but reserves final power and authority for the key decision-maker. In this model, ideas and opinions are welcome, but whether or not they will be heeded is at the absolute discretion of the elite. The third is a
situation of full participation, where each individual in a decision-making body is accorded equal power to determine the outcome of decisions (Pateman 1970, 70–71).

The third model of full participation, which smacks of undesirably “Western” ideals of individualism and the push for liberally democratic and human rights, is clearly unworkable in the Singapore context. Owing to the Singapore government’s ambivalent attitude towards political participation and active citizenship, both pseudo and partial participatory models appear to hold more meaning for this discussion of civil society. The next section of this paper expands on both of these models by examining Singapore 21, the official vision splendid of Singapore in the twenty-first century. Singapore 21 is, as I shall outline, the most significant government statement of recent years, encompassing all facets of Singaporean life from the economic, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and cultural to the social (Fernandez 1997, 1). Above all, though, the Singapore 21 vision is an exercise in political and public-relations expedience: it is aimed at managing political apathy and allaying increasingly widespread fears—predominantly by the middle class—about the lack of citizen participation and civil society in Singapore. As Machiavelli advised in the opening quote to this section, the prince “should think of a method” to ensure political support and longevity (Machiavelli 1979, 35–36).

GESTURAL POLITICS: ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AS CIVIL SOCIETY

In 1999, Singapore’s vision for the twenty-first century, entitled Singapore 21: Together We Make The Difference, was unveiled. Published as a glossy hardback document, Singapore 21 became the latest national vision statement put forward by the Singapore government; it was preceded most prominently by Singapore: The Next Lap (1991) and Vision 1999 (1984). The Singapore 21 project was launched by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong on 19 October 1997, almost two months after he mooted the idea during the annual Prime Minister’s National Day Rally Speech on 24 August 1997 (Fernandez 1997, 1). The primary objective of this project is to build and strengthen the “heartware” of Singapore in the twenty-first century. “Heartware”, a term coined by Prime Minister Goh in the Rally Speech, can be seen as the Singapore government’s attempt to redefine citizenship as embodying a “sense of ownership” (National Day Rally Speech 1997, 43). According to the Preface to Singapore 21, the social capital of “heartware” is to be attained via “the intangibles of society—social cohesion, political stability and the collective will, values and attitudes of a people”. These terms are arguably vague, as the “will, values and attitudes” of people are impossible to pin down.
Instead of attempting to define intangible and possibly ineffable ideals, the authorities appointed a centralised *Singapore 21* Committee and five subject committees with a total of 83 members drawn from all walks of life. The issues for deliberation were posed—by the political leaders themselves—as five apparent dilemmas. The task for each subject committee was to offer practical recommendations to “resolve” their particular dilemma. The five dilemmas and their proposed “solutions”, presented as the five pillars of *Singapore 21*, are summarised in the table above.

The *Singapore 21* blueprint is, to a large extent, a triumphant step forward for local civic groups such as “The Roundtable” that seek to enhance citizens’ participation. Indeed, the central theme of this vision is, as noted by public policy researcher Gillian Koh, “to encourage active citizenship where Singaporeans would take ownership of the issues and problems of their community and nation, and rise up to address these needs to build a brighter future together” (Koh 1999).

The *Singapore 21* has also been referred to as a “new social contract” between the government and citizens, aimed at building social capital to enable citizens to stay cohesive and committed to Singapore, and to give a voice to all Singaporeans (*The Straits Times*, 7 August 2000, 6–7; see also Ooi, Tan and Koh 1999, 127). As David Lim, the Minister of State for Defence and Information and the Arts, declared in a speech commemorating the first “anniversary” of *Singapore 21*:

> [W]e believe the Singapore 21 can grow: Not by a top-down directive and push, but rather through bottom-up initiative and association. We believe that Singapore 21 can be a sustaining and empowering idea, if those who believe in it come forward to identify with the idea, and to claim this as...
their foundation for the future. By their example, others will be encouraged to follow (in *The Straits Times* 7 August 2000, 6).

Ironically, the very foundation of *Singapore 21*—the five pressing dilemmas and the specially selected subject committee members—has been laid primarily in a top-down fashion. Although *Singapore 21* has been depicted, from the start, as a large-scale consultative exercise involving some 6,000 ordinary Singaporeans (*Singapore 21* Committee: Preface), it is perceived by many as yet another motherhood statement by the self-proclaimed all-knowing Singapore government. In a survey commissioned by the authorities to gauge public opinion on *Singapore 21* (in June 2000), almost one in four respondents expressed scepticism (and cynicism) at the vision statement, dismissing it as government propaganda or a political ploy. In other words, *Singapore 21* is deemed an exercise in *pseudo* participation. The government, in collaboration with the local *Straits Times* press, chose to interpret the results of the survey as “encouraging and instructive”, arguing that this “significant minority” can be won over—or perhaps coopted—to play a useful role in providing constructive feedback (*The Straits Times* 7 August 2000, 7). Feedback, or the expression of one’s views on public policy, considered one of the most evident and active signs of citizen participation in government (Painter 1992, 22; Munro-Clark 1992, 13), is a vexed political issue in Singapore, with a sizeable number of people being politically apathetic, passive or fearful of repercussions.11

The concept of ‘Active Citizenship: Making a Difference to Society’, the fifth pillar of *Singapore 21*, is both a measured response and a subtle attempt to address the long-standing problem of political apathy and passivity. According to *Singapore 21*:

Active citizenship means taking an active part, as a citizen, in making the country a better place to live. It means realising that every citizen has a stake in this country. Active citizens keep themselves well informed of issues and challenges facing the country. Instead of leaving it to the Government to do all the thinking, they offer feedback and suggestions founded on thoughtful consideration, with the aim of making things better. And more importantly, they take action and assume responsibility, rolling up their sleeves to help implement what they envision or suggest (*Singapore 21* Committee 1999, 51).

Interestingly, this definition of “active citizenship” draws upon all three of the levels of political participation put forth by Pateman (1970). Keeping oneself “well informed of issues and challenges facing the country” is obviously a form of *pseudo* participation. Offering “feedback and suggestions” moves into the realm...
of partial participation, while “rolling up sleeves to help implement” contains elements of full participation. Due to its political underpinnings and connotations, the question of active participation cum citizenship has become one of the most, if not the most, discussed and contested aspects of the Singapore 21 vision. Recent media—and thus public—attention to the cultivation of civil society in Singapore is a direct result of the call for active citizenship. The willingness of the authorities to engage in discussions about civil society can thus be construed as an attempt to engender active citizenship in the hope of appeasing apparent demands for increased political participation and to deal with the increasing political alienation of the citizenry (Ooi, Tan and Koh 1999; Tan and Chiew 1990).

It comes as little surprise that many civic groups seized the opportunity to publicly announce new agendas. For example, “The Working Committee” (TWC), a civil society advocate group without government links, proclaimed in October 1999 that it was going online to promote civil society (Lim 1999). Even informal associations such as “People Like Us” (PLU), a gay and lesbian group that operates primarily over the Internet, have “rolled up their sleeves” and taken the government to task over their role in society. In May 2000, an application by PLU to hold a public forum on ‘Gays and Lesbians within Singapore 21’ was rejected by the Police Public Entertainment Licensing Unit (PELU) on the grounds that “the mainstream moral values of Singaporeans are conservative” and that Singapore’s Penal Code has provisions against certain homosexual practices (Ng 2000b; 2000c). PLU’s attempt to capitalise on the “momentum” of Singapore 21 for the advancement of gay rights, barely a year after the unveiling of the Vision, was curtly dismissed by the authorities. This episode sparked a short-lived controversy within the pages of local newspapers. More importantly, it sent a clear reminder—or more accurately, a stern warning—that active citizenship and participation in the Singapore context not only has legal, social and cultural limits, but comes with political and ideological boundaries that can and will be strictly enforced at the sole discretion of the authorities.

With the final word always resting with the authorities, political and/or public participation in Singapore is at best partial and at worst pseudo, but never full. Or, as Rodan puts it, there is an “apparent gulf between government rhetoric about increased political tolerance and the practice of the authorities” (Rodan 1996b, 112–13). In other words, the wording of the fifth Singapore 21 dilemma—“Consensus and Consultation vs Decisiveness and Quick Action”—was no accident. The “new” rhetoric about cultivating civil society and active citizenship is, in effect, a public relations exercise aimed at establishing a credo that endorses the existence of political boundaries under the umbrella of “decisiveness and quick action”, particularly when bureaucratic efficiency is called upon or when Singapore’s “competitive advantage in the global economy” is at stake (Summary of the
Deliberations 1999, 16). The corollary is that “consensus and consultation”, the hall-
marks of genuine participation, can be conveniently and tactically dismissed. As a result, political boundaries in Singapore—euphemistically termed “OB-
markers”, or “out-of-bounds markers”—remain firmly etched in the minds of many Singaporean residents.

The concept of “OB-markers” arose following a 1994 episode dubbed “The Catherine Lim affair” (Koh 1998, 4). On 20 November 1994, a political commentary by well-known Singaporean novelist Catherine Lim entitled ‘One Gov-
ernment, Two Styles’ was published in the Sunday edition of Singapore’s Straits Times daily. In it, Lim opined that Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s promise of a more open, consultative and consensual leadership style had been abandoned in favour of the authoritarian style of his predecessors (Lim 1994b, 12). The gist of Lim’s contention was that:

Over the years, a pattern of governance has emerged that is not exactly what was envisaged. Increasingly, the promised Goh style of people-
orientation is being subsumed under the old style of top-down decisions (Lim 1994b, 12).

Exactly a fortnight after this (on 4 December 1994), the Catherine Lim affair officially “began”. In a written reply to Lim, published in the same newspaper, the Prime Minister’s press secretary, Chan Heng Wing, defended Goh’s style of rule by stating that “PM Goh remains committed to consultation and consensus politics” (Chan 1994a, 4). Goh himself reacted the following day, rebuking Lim for “going beyond the pale” in undermining his authority as Prime Minister, an action deemed unacceptable and disrespectful in the Confucianist “Asian context” (Chua 1994, 1). More significantly, Goh articulated in no uncertain terms that political commentators should expect strong rebuttals from the government if they attacked individual politicians or policies. In addition, Prime Minister Goh outlined what were to become known as “OB-markers” or the parameters of political debate:

If a person wants to set the agenda for Singapore by commenting regularly on politics, our [the Government’s] view has been, and it is my view too, that the person should do this in the political arena. Because if you are outside the political arena and influence opinion, and if people believe that your policies are right, when we know they are wrong, you are not there to account for the policy (Goh, cited in Chua 1994, 1).

Press secretary Chan reiterated the Prime Minister’s message with a second letter to the press on 29 December 1994. Not only did Chan re-emphasise the aims of...
“OB-markers”, he rationalised their dubious existence by contending that the boundaries were really “to define limits of the space he [the Prime Minister] is expanding” (Chan 1994b, 26). The icing on the cake came almost two months later when Lee Kuan Yew, Senior Minister in Goh’s cabinet, endorsed Goh’s sharp response to Catherine Lim’s political comments (Ng 1995, 1).15

Through this saga, it was made patently clear that OB-markers are invoked to limit political engagement, civic action and participation, and anything else remotely linked to politics (Tan 2000, 103). Of course, what at any point in time constitutes “politics” remains unclear, and deliberately so. What is evident here, in the context of the civil society discourse, is that the PAP government uses a curious combination of political forms and practices to accommodate greater socio-cultural plurality on the one hand, while using both suppressive and auto-regulatory structures to limit its growth and development on the other (see Rodan 1996b, 114; Lee and Birch 2000). Auto-regulation, as a disciplinary tactic to ensure a panoptical, and thus automatic, functioning of power and control (Foucault 1977), enables the formation and operation of what I call “gestural politics” in Singapore. The Singaporean idea of civil society is an excellent example of gestural politics: on the one hand, citizens are encouraged to harness the positive energies of the Singapore 21 vision, especially with regard to becoming active citizens; on the other, stern warnings are issued at regular intervals to remind people of the existence of OB-markers and other state-defined conditions. For example, in a June 2000 interview with Singapore’s main Chinese-language daily Lianhe Zaobao, unambiguously entitled ‘Views Count, but they don’t Enslave Policy’, Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng argued that because the government makes the right decisions most of the time, it has the mandate from voters, and therefore the right and responsibility to “judge and choose from public views” (reported in The Straits Times Interactive 28 June 2000). Minister Wong makes it abundantly clear that “while the government listens to public opinion, it will not let popular opinion sway policy decisions” (The Straits Times Interactive 28 June 2000). The justification for such an admonition is, of course, the long-term interests of Singaporeans.

A more recent example of gestural politics is the opening of a 6,000 square metre Speakers’ Corner in Singapore’s Hong Lim Park on 1 September 2000. Loosely modelled after London’s Speakers’ Corner in Hyde Park, the decision to allow Singapore’s first-ever free-speech venue was intended to “help develop civil society” by making active citizenship “more visible” (Koh 2000, 10). Although no special permits are needed, speakers are required to register—preferably up to 30 days in advance—at an adjacent police post, and show proof of their Singaporean citizenship. Aspiring speakers are also advised that all existing Singapore laws, along with the cryptic “OB-markers” that bar discussion of racial, religious and sensitive political issues, apply unconditionally (Yap 2000, 3;
Lim 2000b, 4). While supporters hailed the Speakers’ Corner decision as a positive move towards encouraging “participatory citizenship”, detractors and political opponents considered the soapbox a political farce, arguing that it makes a mockery of Singapore’s constitutional right to free speech.

Arguably, the most noteworthy and also the most overlooked comments on Speakers’ Corner came from Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong when he described the decision to allow the public airing of views as having “emblematic” rather than practical, significance (Ng 2000a). In other words, Speakers’ Corner is purely gestural, a political tactic aimed at “silencing” opponents who have been campaigning for the right to open and free speech, and at the same time luring Internet-based dissent out into the open. Indeed, as *The Straits Times* reported on 12 November 2000, less than three months after its opening, the novelty of Speakers’ Corner was fast fading, with few regular speakers and a sparse, uninterested crowd of listeners (Yeoh 2000). On the eve of the first anniversary of Speakers’ Corner, Minister of State for Home Affairs Ho Peng Kee reiterated Deputy Prime Minister Lee’s comment when he noted that “the corner was not a formal mechanism for the Government to collect feedback or respond to it” (Chia 2001). Ultimately, the deliberate lack of political attention given to issues by speakers at the corner is likely to ensure the demise of this free public forum.

**CONCLUSION**

‘Civil society’ sounds good; it has a good feel to it; it has the look of a fine old wine, full of depth and complexity. Who could possibly object to it, who would not wish for its fulfilment? (Kumar 1993, 376)

Singapore is emblematic of a globally-savvy, well plugged-in society that is highly adept at appropriating and advocating the latest management and information buzzwords. The concept and language of civic-cum-civil society is no exception. Like most other social, cultural and political theories, however, each individual application of the concept of civil society is highly variegated, and as such, tends to exhibit its own peculiarities. However, given its unique ability to encompass and address a whole range of problems—including, inter alia, political participation and active citizenry, ownership, social mores, values and civility—the concept and ideology of both civic and civil society will continue to be mobilised and promoted in Singapore, albeit under the terms and conditions of the existing political establishment.

Like most policy and/or political decisions, the embrace of civil society will appease and appeal to those who are or have been seeking a greater political

voice, while leaving many others highly sceptical of the government’s real intentions. Those who find the political pressures of civil society too “painful” to bear will either exit the civil society scene altogether or participate via PAP-established channels of communication. On 15 August 2001, Tan Chong Kee, founder of the Singapore Internet Community (Sintercom) website, which is dedicated to alternative viewpoints on local politics and other issues and widely heralded as the leading light of civil society in Singapore, announced that he was shutting down the website after eight years of self-funded operation (Sivakkumaran 2001). In an interview with The Straits Times newspaper, Tan admitted that the unfortunate decision was prompted by his personal conviction that civil society was a “lost cause” in Singapore (Tan 2001). With Sintercom’s demise, the “space” of civil society has undoubtedly receded, giving the Singaporean government one fewer political problem to solve. The twin strategies of cooptation and auto-regulation (see Lee 2001; Lee and Birch 2000), so successfully pursued by the PAP government since the country’s independence, appear likely to continue and even be extended, but with greater finesse and subtlety. This is likely because there is undoubtedly a need to “manage” and proactively anticipate the emerging social, cultural and political forces arising from a more well-informed, well-educated and affluent younger generation (Jones 1998, 156; Rodan 1996b, 95–96).

What, then, is the “Singapore idea” of civil society in the future? I would suggest, in view of the entrenchment of the PAP government’s management style in current times, that not much will change in the short to medium term. Civic or civil society will continue to “sound good” and “feel good”, and as such will find little resistance (Kumar 1993, 376)—apart from the odd aberration exemplified by Sintercom’s closure. In the longer term, though, it is likely that civil society will find its own voice, which is likely to take a form different from that chartered by the Singapore 21 vision. For the time being, however, the Singapore idea of civil society will continue to (re)present gestural politics par excellence.

NOTES

1Research for this paper was undertaken while I was Visiting Scholar in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS) at Australian National University in August-October 2000. I am grateful to Dr Christopher Collier (RSPAS, ANU) and Dr Greg McCarthy (Department of Politics, Adelaide University) for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ‘Communication and Cultural Identity in Asia’ International Workshop at the Mt Tamborine Summit, Queensland on 27–29 November 2000.

Shortly after, George Yeo’s appointment as full Minister for Information and the Arts was confirmed, and he held this portfolio for nine years. In 1999, he became Minister of Trade and Industry.

It is important to note that the term “civil society”, as well as its closely-linked variant “civic society”, has been in use since Singapore’s colonial days. Therefore, I do not suggest that the notion was conceptualised in Singapore by Yeo. My point, which will be reiterated in various ways throughout this paper, is that the Singapore government is now prepared to engage in public discussions about the theoretical concept(s) and practice of civil/civic society. See also Hewison and Rodan’s (1996) argument that civil society in Southeast Asia, Singapore included, is ongoing and has historical precedents.

Birch (1993a; 1993b) makes the interesting point that few, if any, Singaporeans can recite or remember all five shared values by heart.

Established in 1990, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) is a self-help group that mobilises Malay/Muslim professionals to play a leading and active role in the development and long-term transformation of Malay/Muslim Singaporeans into a dynamic community that takes pride in its place in the larger Singaporean society. AMP was borne out of frustration with Mendaki, the government-sanctioned council representing the Muslim community in Singapore. For further reading on the AMP’s (and Mendaki’s) involvement in civil society, see Rodan 1996b, 102–06.

For more information on the workings and history of Singapore’s Courtesy Campaign, see the 20th Anniversary publication of the Singapore Courtesy Council (1999). The Singapore Courtesy Council was dissolved in February 2001 and its courtesy programs were subsumed under the Singapore Kindness Movement Council on 1 March 2001. See: http://www.sg.skm.

The Roundtable was established in 1994 to encourage and enlarge the scope of citizen participation in civil society. The Roundtable’s Committee for 2001 comprises mainly successful professionals, including Chandra Mohan Nair, Raymond Lim and Zulkifli Baharudin. The Roundtable’s objective is clearly reflected in its motto: “Striving Towards a More Vibrant Civil Society”. Further information on The Roundtable can be obtained from the website: http://www.roundtable.org.sg.

Abdullah Tarmugi, Singapore’s Minister for Community Development, noted at an Institute of Policy Studies conference in November 1998 that the rate of volunteerism in Singapore stands at around 10 per cent (compared with 39 per cent in the United States and 25 per cent in Japan). He considers that volunteerism has a crucial role to play in the development of a “civil society” (in Ooi 1998, 3).

The Singapore 21 subject committees comprised members of parliament, volunteers in welfare and community organisations, lawyers, unionists, technicians, teachers and many other “officially approved” citizens. Their names are given in fine print on the inside front and back covers of the Singapore 21 document.

The deliberations of all five subject committees were summarised and published in five separate booklets. The booklets were then consolidated into a folder entitled Summary of the Deliberations of the Subject Committees to the Singapore 21 Committee (1999) and submitted to the main committee for collation.

See the study by Ooi, Tan and Koh (1999) on the extent of political participation and policy involvement in Singapore. See also an earlier study by Tan and Chiew (1990), and more recently, Ho (2000).
Reference is made to Singapore’s Penal Code Sections 377 and 377(a), which clearly outlaw homosexual practices. For a summary of these legalities, as well as the history and activities of “People Like Us”, see PLU’s website at: http://www.geocities.com/plu-singapore.

Although the category “OB-markers”—in the form of various (self-)censorship codes and pieces of legislation—already existed, it received unprecedented publicity during the “Catherine Lim affair”.

Catherine Lim’s article of 20 November 1994 was preceded by an earlier, less critical, piece entitled ‘The PAP and the People—A Great Affective Divide’, published in The Straits Times Weekly Edition on 10 September 1994. It is interesting to note that another article that appeared on the same day (20 November 1994) also questioned the PAP’s style of government. Written by prominent Straits Times columnist Sumiko Tan, this article was not mentioned at all during the “Catherine Lim affair”, probably because of Tan’s safe conclusion that it was “too early to measure the progress of Mr Goh’s more open government, or the lack of it” (Tan 1994, 2).

For further reading on the “Catherine Lim affair”, see Fernandez (1994, 30) and other reports in The Straits Times (17 December 1994 and 24 January 1995). See also comments by K. Y. L. Tan (2000), Rodan (1996b) and Krishnan et al. (1996).

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