Book Review

Civil Society and the State in Singapore, by Carol Soon and Gillian (eds.) 2017, World Scientific: Singapore, 340 pp.

The Speakers' Corner in Hong Lim Park, Singapore has not been the same since 2013. It is marked now as a gathering place for civil society movements. The protest at the site, on 16th February 2013, was Singapore's largest since its independence in 1965.

The protest was in response to the government's Population White Paper (PWP). Based on economic data and analysis, the PWP proposes that Singapore's population to be between 6.5-6.9 million by 2030. The paper also highlights changes in careers and lifestyles that Singaporeans must come to terms with given the demographic changes.

Singaporeans main grievances with the PWP was the government's justification to bring in foreign workers to sustain its competitive economy. The PWP explains that around 30,000 new permanent residents as well as 25,000 naturalised citizens are needed every year to support the country's falling birth rates. The findings upset Singaporeans especially at a time when they were having a tough time holding on to their jobs amid a growing number of foreign workers in the island city state.

Singaporean scholars view the public protest at Hong Lim as "the new normal", one that was very much in keeping with the winds of change sweeping Singapore's politics since the country's general election in 2011. Scholars spoke of a new normal, one where civil society, which for so long has been kept relatively latent, would be the third pillar that provides for a new deliberative democracy. They see the Hong Lim's protest as a new turning point in Singapore politics as for decades, the term civil society had been a taboo. In Singapore, civic society is widely preferred than the term civil society as the former connotes a more agreeable or less combative relationship between voluntary associations and the state, one where the latter expects voluntary associations to play a supporting or junior role in articulating or influencing public policy.

The above issues are extensively discussed in Civil Society and the state in Singapore, co-edited by Carol Soon and Gillian Koh. Published in 2017, the book has 18 contributors and contains 12 chapters, based on three themes: "Philosophies and Approaches", "Change Agents", and "The Future of Civil Society". The book provides fresh insights and updates of the Singaporean civil society and its response to a changing Singaporean polity that has, according to many scholars and observers, been subjected to authoritarian rule.

Contributors discuss civil society along three well-acknowledged

perspectives: liberalism, communitarianism and Hegelian perspective. The chapters also see the authors, emphasizing to varying degrees, the two main approaches of civil society: social capital and conflict.

The first three chapters of the book discuss major approaches and philosophies behind civil society. Kwok Kian-Woon, for instance, offers an alternative view of the nature of civil society in Singapore. He attempts to do so by applying the social capital approach, one that emphasises on trust, solidarity and nation-building and the need to enrich existing networks. In his attempt to "throw some light on the workings of civil society in Singapore", Kwok discusses six concepts: nation and civil society, idealism and ideology, civility and conflict, liberal individualism and communitarianism, moral pluralism and public reasoning, and moral reasoning and social inclusion. After discussing these concepts in detail, Kwok offers a new perspective of civil society in Singapore, calling it conflictual consensus that attempts to merge the concept of social capital and conflict.

Faizah Jamal's 'Engagement in Environmental Activism' extends Kwok's discussion on civil society's perspective by attempting to address the confrontational – collaboration continuum of social capital. Sharing her own experience in environment management, Faizah argues that the key to negotiate the confrontational –collaboration issues and to engage the state requires three conditions – relationship, evidence and "languaging". She draws such an engagement code from the interaction she had with the state when dealing with four environmental issues concerning Lower Pierce Reservoir, Chek Jawa, Bukit Brown and the "Green Conversation". Faizah's approach to engaging the state is similar to the one proposed by Alvin Tan in the next chapter. In describing the new approach to engagement, Alvin highlights the importance of collaboration. He proposes the need for civil society to collaborate in five ways to deal with new diversities and that include collaboration with the audience through the techniques of participatory theatre, gradual movement towards collaboration with the state, collaboration within civil society, collaboration with agencies and corporations and collaboration across cultures. Alvin's proposals provide a fresh way of dealing with the changing dynamics of Singaporean society where there is now the need for state and civil society to recalibrate traditional approaches of managing issues given Singapore's increasing diversity. The discussions in this section confirmed the Tocquevillean" nature of Singapore civil societies which emphasises networking and reciprocity.

The second section of the book (Change Agents) describes how civil society work in Singapore from multiple perspectives - liberalism, communitarian, Hegelian, or a combination of them) work in Singapore. Centring his discussion on liberalism, Walter Woon describes how new

developments such as immigration, technology and education will influence the dynamics of Singapore's civil society. He emphasizes that the changing demographic as a result of Singapore's liberal naturalisation policy has brought new challenges that require new civil society arrangement.

Using the metaphor of the *banyan tree* or *tembusu* tree to describe the authoritarian nature of the state in mind, Carol Soon combines both communitarian and liberal tradition to explain how social media has helped activists in Singapore bypass traditional regulations that govern civil society movements. Though technology has helped redefine collective action and civil society, Carol explains that technology should not alter the way conflict is resolved. Regardless of advances in technology, conflict resolution remains the same, which according to her, is still based on public discourse and rational dialogue with or without technology. Chapter 6 focusses on the role of different types of civil society in integrating immigrants. This is of special relevance to the island state given the rapid growth of its population due to migration. The state faces challenges in integrating the migrant population in the larger society, an issue that triggered the protest at Hong Lim Park in 2013. The role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in integrating the migrant population remains a challenge not only because of the varied profile of migrant workers but also because of local involvement "in the activities of service-oriented and advocacy-oriented organisations related to migrants" remains low.

Given this scenario, what will the future civil society of Singapore look like? The third and final section of the book describes how its contributors see the future of civil society in Singapore.

Adopting the communitarian perspective, in particular that of Michael Sandels, Ang Bee Lian describes Singapore's "Many Helping Hands" as the need to cultivate close relationship between the state, the voluntary welfare organisations (VWO) and citizens to deliver services more effectively. This chapter adopted the social capital perspective, as well as the communitarian model of service provision and nation-building. In the following chapter, Corinna Lim and Michelle Ng combine both social capital and conflict approaches to champion social issues such as domestic violence arguing that a lot of sustainable and innovative ways can be adopted to enhance future civil society. Sharon Siddique's discussion on ethnic based civil society in Singapore describes Singapore's continuing challenge to establish ethnic-based civil society and the need to preserve Singapore's multicultural paradigm. She argues for the continuation of multiracial self-help groups which prevents the domination of one ethnic group over the other. Using the Hegelian approach, Siddique demonstrates the need for the state to take a neutral stance to allow for the continuation of ethnic-based civil societies. The challenge now is for the state to move

beyond the ethnic based civil societies that have so characterised Singapore's multiculturalism to now include the new migrants. Siddique concludes the ethnic-based civil society model "can no longer contain the complexities of Singapore's desire to become a global city." The ensuing chapters depict the challenge for civil society to cater to the increasing complexity of the Singaporean society. Kenneth Paul Tan employed the Habermasian perspective in describing the need for government to learn quickly and respond to alternative voices. He adopted the public deliberation approach, popularised by Jurgen Habermas, to explain the importance of education and required skills to deliver such deliberation for a better Singapore. Healthy democracy, he says, would mean the need to have more social capital and this requires participation from the people, as well as ensuring that civil education and encouraging deliberative democracy. To make sure that volunteerism in youth movements in Singapore is truly self-directed and therefore sustainable, Tong Yee and Tay Ek Kiat in Chapter 11 discuss on the aspect of self-discovery and self-worth in improving effective service for youth activism in Singapore. The authors stress on the importance of social capital, stressing its communitarian and liberal approaches. In the final chapter, Kelvin YL Tan proposes the pruning of the *banyan* or *tembusu* tree, proposing the need for a new kind of legislative framework for a more active civil society in Singapore. He is not, however, overly sanguine on the state's ability to entertain such changes. Rather, he hopes that the state will be able to react quickly in dealing with unstoppable alternative voices in society.

To sum up, the book provides a good depiction of the issues surrounding civil society in Singapore. It is a bold move, a first in trying to bring the different issues of civil society in Singapore out in the open especially at a time when Singapore is facing increasing diversity. Though there have been attempts, especially by Kenneth Tan, to move away from a social capital discourse in explaining civil society in Singapore, it can be summed up the contributors have struggled to move beyond the "Tocquevillian" argument of civil society.

Makmor Tumin
Faculty of Economics and Administration
University of Malaya
Email: makmor@um.edu.my