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a journal of theory & strategy

“I strongly disagree with the Asian centric values advocates and maintain that sooner or later there would be a call for freedom for all the repressed regimes in Asia and Singapore is not an exception to this rule. Sooner or later the floodgates of change and repressive regimes around the world have to realise that democracy is considered the birth right of every person,” he added.

By Tony Sitathan



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ALLiance aims to be a movement journal for the *Alliance of the Libertarian Left (ALL)*.

The *Alliance of the Libertarian Left* is a multi-tendency coalition of mutualists, agorists, voluntaryists, geolibertarians, left-Rothbardians, green libertarians, dialectical anarchists, radical minarchists, and others on the libertarian left, united by an opposition to statism and militarism, to cultural intolerance (including sexism, racism, and homophobia), and to the prevailing corporatist capitalism falsely called a free market; as well as by an emphasis on education, direct action, and building alternative institutions, rather than on electoral politics, as our chief strategy for achieving liberation.



Singapore And Its Road To Democracy

Tony Sitathan

Singapore and its road to democracy

The memory and words of John Stuart Mills echoed through the corridors of the Shangri-la Ballroom during the 6th World Movement for Democracy (WMD) Congress held in Jakarta in April 2010 for four days. It was attended by close to 600 democracy activists and delegates from around 118 countries. The central theme of the event was “Solidarity Across Cultures: Working together for Democracy.” It was a fitting theme to an event that brought together some of the top politicians, former heads of governments, student leaders, democracy activists and youth movement leaders from around the world to openly debate and exchange lively ideas.

The basic premise of JS Mills states that the individual ought to be free to do as he or she wishes unless he or she harms others and Individuals are rational enough to make decisions about their good being while governments should interfere only when it is for the protection of society. He said that the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. Those were the words penned by JS Mills almost 151 years ago and how true it is till today, agreed Orazio Balletinni, one of the democracy delegates from Grupo Faro based in Ecuador. He was not alone in stating the obvious that democracies around the world were being threatened and challenged by autocratic regimes.

Asian values versus Western democracy

Anwar Ibrahim, former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia and the leader of Partai Keadilan in Malaysia maintained that there were still apologists, diehard sceptics and proponents of autocracy who say that democracy is not meant for all cultures because it is largely a Western construct and certainly not the only system for the rest of the world. “Asian values, for example, are said to be inherently incompatible with liberal democracy. The argument goes that the fundamental teachings of Confucius place great importance on filial piety and submission to state authority. He said that in Asia leaders of opposition parties and dissidents were incarcerated under draconian laws and no effort was spared in the war against ‘subversive elements’ and the ‘enemies’ of the people. He said that that the Asian values’ argument and ‘we-are-not-yet-ready-for-democracy’ excuse as nothing more than a doctrine for the justification of authoritarian rule. “There are still governments that are founded on the perpetuation of power not by free and fair elections but from arbitrary succession from the father to the son, or from one military clique to another, or even from one power elite to the next. And there are those who appear to have all the characteristics of a liberal democracy in so far as their domestic governance is concerned but they continue to violate human rights with impunity.”

The Singapore Quagmire

While Anwar’s remarks were aimed generally at autocratic regimes, they struck a chord of familiarity with Seelan Palay who is a youth activists from Singapore. He pointed out the culture of fear among Singaporeans and questioned the gov-

governments should be something that people should think very rationally and consciously about as they should not take it for granted. And should discuss for themselves what is best for society,” he said. He also believed that there should be more alternative political parties like the SDP or WP to choose from. So that it would create a more vibrant society in Singapore.

Ryota Jonen, a project manager with the World Movement for Democracy (WMD) and active in the youth caucus of the WMD said that his role was to mainly to coordinate the various youth programs among the developing countries. “One such program coordinated by WDA is called “Defending Civil Societies” that was started in 2007. The 3 initiatives are defending young activists, creating mentorship programs and using new media.” He hoped that the WDA can engage more groups and people in Singapore under the various initiatives where young activists in Singapore would be welcome to engage the WDM in potential projects in Singapore. He said that having such invited forums of political exchanges in Singapore was necessary as it would enable greater participation of people in being involved in the political process in Singapore especially from the grassroots level.

Singapore is not an exception to the rule

Tian Chua a Malaysian opposition politician and Member of Parliament for the Batu constituency said that both Malaysia and Singapore came from the same DNA gene pool where they shared identical political structure and culture as well as similar framework of oppression by the respective regimes. He added that Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew were ardent followers of the Asian values argument. So what then makes a good democracy under such a context? “If you do not have a rotation of political parties that run the government then that is not democracy. Democracies in order to thrive must have competition. Without competition there is no true democracy,” he added. Tian Chua was also confident that democratic changes in Singapore would come a lot faster compared to Malaysia due to the drive by the youth as well as those that wanted change but were afraid that any changes would come at the expense of stability and economic prosperity. These people he said had to come to terms with their own fear and had to decide what was myth and reality. And ultimately they had to make a stand using the power of the ballot paper to elect their leaders.

According to Khin Maung Win, a self exiled correspondent and Deputy Director of the Democratic Voice of Burma based in Oslo Norway, said that Singapore is trying to be different from the other Asian countries who advocated Asian values which is different from the values of the West. “They want to have their own set of Asian values for ASEAN as they say they have a better understanding of what works in Asia compared to the West. Rightly or wrongly Asian leaders and the Americans have advocated to our Burmese government to be transparent and the need to elect our government and the need to have freedom to express what we think and freedom to hold assemblies. So we need to have such common universal values which are common to all people irrespective whether they are Asian or Western.

According to Larry Diamond, the key message behind the book is emancipation from authority. It however does not mean disrespect for authority but having critical independent evaluation of authority. And the cultural shift or questioning of authority and ability to express oneself tends to go on a greater emphasis on tolerance and a greater emphasis on freedom. Singaporeans have said that they have cared about stability and economic growth rather than democracy per se. "One senses that over the last decade the growing restlessness among young people in Singapore. That Singapore has become a boring place. As people grow up and are socialized in an era of prosperity there is something intrinsic in the human character and personality. Is it imaginable that Singapore could be the only country on earth that defies what seems to be a general law about the human personality," he said.

Taking for instance the turnout of the Singaporeans in the dialogue session, proved that Singaporeans were not apathetic to political developments. He found their questions both uplifting and inspiring. Singapore he said was probably at its adolescence stage of democratic development. "If you look at public opinion survey data there is very strong support for democratic values and principles. So it depends where there is support for democracy in people's hearts and minds rather than it can be collectively expressed," he added.

Collective human spirit

"There is something about the human personality that craves freedom, creativity, autonomy and human dignity, and to have everything controlled and dictated to you and to have a system where people are not able to challenge their leaders and to express their minds without fear of being sued into bankruptcy and to determine their own future is a fundamental violation of human dignity. One example that people will question this and if those that are unable to do so would migrate overseas," added Larry. Larry also added that he believed that the youth in Singapore are far from apathetic and are craving for freedom, autonomy and other universal values. And pointed out some of the possibilities of how Singapore can become a true democracy. One model he talked about was the "colour revolution" and the lessons that can be derived from people power revolution in the Philippines, and the Orange Revolution. Although some Singaporeans from the audience pointed out the failures of the colour revolution model, Larry made references to Michael McFall's article on the colour revolution that was published by the Journal of Democracy called "Transitions from post communism". He claimed that this article would be an eye-opener to those aspiring to become aware of the challenges of democracy.

Bart Wood, the President of the International Federation of Liberal Youth which is part of the World Democracy Movement said that he would like a more bipartisan government in Singapore so that the critical reflection of how votes are being counted should play a very important role towards the democratization process of Singapore. "As it was necessary for people to dare to stand up for their rights in a peaceful and democratic manner. More importantly he said that people should understand that giving power to

ernment's level of confidence claiming that they had the unspoken mandate of the people. "If they are so confident why do they have to arrests even a protests action carried out by even one person or two. They also say that the people are so apathetic and don't care about democracy and human rights. If they really don't care then why do they have to arrests people who are only distributing fliers? And if they are so confident why did they shut down every single alternative newspaper by 1990. This clearly shows the government's insecurity. There are lots of cracks in the system," he added. "The government likes to argue that Singaporeans don't care. I would like to argue that Singaporeans don't know enough to care. When there no accesses to freedom of information how do you expect people to care about anything," he countered. Is Singapore as Seelan argues devoid of alternative information and Singaporeans being kept in the dark about making meaningful political decisions?

According to Carl Gershman, the President from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) based in the United States, said that Singapore is not an absolute dictatorship by any means. "But there are very severe restrictions on the rights of political expression and it is important that the space for political expression is expanded. He was concerned that Singapore can continue to maintain a system of effective government for a long period of time if they do not have the checks and balance of a real democracy. That is the problem that he foresees as happening. "The NED wants to assist our friends (including the SDP) there to expand the political space in Singapore. We have to be able to encourage the people in Singapore that want to expand their political space and political freedom to feel that they are not alone. The government would like to marginalise these people as much as possible and they have to have a voice both within Singapore and the international community. We can help give them that voice. You have to have international support for the people who are trying to encourage these debates in Singapore." he added. The reason for concern he said was due to the libel laws in Singapore as it is very difficult to have a full and open and fair debate because people can be bankrupted for making what is seen in the United States as making mild criticism of political leaders.

The Singapore paradigm and the reason for Singapore's indifference

While Singapore is still seen to be experimenting with the right formulae for democracy, there are those from the Singapore government that believe that such measures are necessary to maintain a high economic growth rate and prosperity by toning liberal values and democracy perhaps a notch down.

When Charlie Rose, the affable American television talk show host and journalist interviewed Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew on his TV program he asked SM Lee if he never had a moment when he thought that Singapore was too authoritative. SM Lee explained that his job was to get the place going and get everybody a decent life and a decent education. "And we're now the best educated people in the whole of East Asia. And that the ends were laudable. Because everybody wants the same ends. Everybody wants good education and good

health. And the means. I had the consent and support of the population. If they opposed me and they did not cooperate, it wouldn't have worked," he added.

The elder statesman is credited for putting Singapore on the global map. Senior Minister Lee is also considered the official mascot of Singapore admittedly by his son and current Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong. But the big question remains whether SM Lee would have done it any differently?

According to current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, when he was recently interviewed by Charlie Rose he defended SM Lee by stating that Lee Kuan Yew made a state where there was none, a country, a nation which will become a nation which nobody believed could succeed. And he's made a system which went on without him and which will endure beyond him," he added. And when he was asked how Lee Hsien Loong measures his commitment to democracy? "We measure it by the legitimacy of the government and by the results, how Singapore works and whether Singaporeans are able to have a better life. Basically we don't measure ourselves by an American model to what extent we approximate you. We are trying to find a formula which works for Singapore." said Hsien Loong.

Cry Liberty!

What then is the model that works best for Singapore? According to Hans Van Beelen, the President of Liberal International and a Member of Parliament in the EU, who was present in Singapore during a forum sponsored by the Singapore Democratic Party in Singapore, maintained that when he came through the airport observing Singapore he felt it was a very modern country with high levels of education and high levels of prosperity. "But when you look behind the curtain or behind the façade you see that there is much repression. Indeed there is no free press, no free society and not even a free market. I would encourage the Singapore government to let the people debate openly, contest the elections openly and demonstrate openly. Don't fence yourself in. These are basic human values," he added. He said that when they discussed free trade agreements between the EU and Singapore they put in human rights clauses in the free trade agreements. Also the Singapore government has allegedly signed the Commonwealth human rights declaration. So the Singapore government is said to be obligated by what they had signed earlier. He wanted the Singapore government to be able to give human rights a chance.

He also debunked the myth that Asians only want a free market and are not interested in liberty and free speech. "It would be a discrimination to say that democracy is alien to Asian values. To manage a controlled society is not beneficial to the interests of the people especially in Singapore Democracy cannot be stopped at Singapore's borders. Dictatorships are an exception while free societies are the rule today," he added.

According to Marc Plattner the founding co-editor of the Journal of Democracy and vice-president for research and studies at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), said that it was false to think that there was a necessity to make a choice between prosperity and economic growth on one

hand and democracy on the other. He then maintained that why do (certain) regimes then imitate a true democracy? "They put out the façade of a democracy but avoid the real thing. To some extent it's for the case of maintaining power for the elites which is reflective of powers all over the world. But democracy is also seen as something fashionable and has a very high degree of international legitimacy, especially countries that are open to the world and want to maintain a reputation for freedom of democracy. There is also a fear that making a real transition to democracy would lead to chaos," he said.

In short he said that it was very hard to understand why Singapore should not be able to follow the same path as its Asian neighbours especially given its very high educational and incomes levels. "My guess is in the not too distant future it will follow this path and cease to be an anomaly among the world's highly developed countries." He was also hopeful that perhaps one day the World Movement for Democracy would hold its bi-annual assembly in Singapore instead.

Singapore the perfect dictatorship

Marc's colleague and co-editor of the Journal of Democracy, Dr. Larry Diamond a Professor of Sociology and Political Science at Stanford University made some interesting observations on the workshop sponsored by the WDM in Singapore. He made references of Singapore electoral system to that written by a Mexican author who called the Mexican system a perfect dictatorship. There are similarities he said between the then autocratic regime in Mexico and Singapore. And the perfect dictatorship once has now evolved into a democracy. According to him there are independent literatures written by social scholars that there is an emerging argument that the perfect dictatorship now in the world seems to be Singapore. One reason he argued why Singapore was so successful socially and economically is that it has such a subtle touch to its authoritarianism. Where certain parts of the world are unaware of the degree of authoritarianism and that it is an authoritarian society. He said that why Singapore will be a democracy rather sooner than later.

"If you look at the broad arch of history and in quoting President Obama that the arch of history does not go on a straight line but bends to seek justice. If you look at the world's changes in the last several decades now at least 60% of the world's states are elected democracies and Singapore is dramatic but astonishing outlier in terms of lack of freedom, lack of political democracy and lack of justice.

"So the regime in Singapore notwithstanding its accomplishment in social and economic development is standing on the wrong side of history. Sooner or later changes in the political system follow the changes in the social economical changes. The modernization theory in the 1960s said that as people become better educated and better income securities, eventually their values change. They develop more capacity for civil societies, where people eventually want freedom and are better able to organize for it. He said that the book, "Modernization Cultural Change and Democracy and the Human Development Sequence" published in 2005 gave a good description of the current norms in Singapore.