Making a monkey of free speech

A lonely democrat's bold stance has the Singapore Government on the defensive, reveals

Garry Rodan.

In a CNN cable television program last December, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew said he didn't know why people regard the city-state as restrictive. "We are freer and freer day by day, year by year," the Senior Minister insisted. But whoever is enjoying this freedom, it certainly isn't Dr Chee Soon Juan -- Secretary-General of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP).

He recently served a seven-day jail sentence after refusing to pay a fine for delivering a public speech without a permit, in violation of the Public Entertainments Act. Following last Wednesday's court decision, he is now serving 12 days in jail for a second conviction. So too will SDP colleague, Wong Hon Teoy, for abetting Chee by adjusting a microphone and loudspeaker.

Chee's speeches took place in December and January at Raffles Place, the heart of the central business district. Authorities are not happy about lunchtime political forums there. According to Lee: "There would be pandemonium. We are not that kind of society.

In March, Chee will again face court on a charge of violating the Environmental Public Health Act by selling his book on political dissent in Asia without a permit from the Health Commissioner. Chee, a Singaporean, and one of the opposition in general, are often beset with inordinate delays and complications. Chee is prepared to face the courts in an attempt to fight for the right to free speech proclaimed in the constitution.

Predictably, the Singapore establishment has dismissed Chee. If he wants to change the law, it is argued, he must get elected and work through parliament. But Chee is issuing a challenge not seen in Singapore politics for 30 years and the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) is not quite sure how to deal with it.

He is consciously rejecting electoralism in favour of genuine democracy, pressing for the opportunity to adequately engage with the public and mobilise support between elections. Without this, polls remain a limited form of political competition, the main effect of which is to legitimise an essentially authoritarian system.

One impediment to opposition in Singapore is a tightly controlled domestic media that uncritically regurgitates official policy and often ignores or lampoons government critics. Attempts to get around this have been unsuccessful. A political video by the SDP was banned, as was use of the internet to provide information on SDP electoral candidates.

Ever more fundamental a problem is posed by the Societies Act, under which organisations not officially registered as "political" are barred from political comment or activity. This not only stifles public debate, it also prevents interest groups and formation and denies opposition parties access to expertise and resources essential to compete with the Government.

Yet another problem for the opposition is the Government's extensive use of libel and defamation suits. This has been a brilliant device to divert opponents from the task of developing credible alternative programs and support bases.

Last Wednesday's fines of $32,500 and $32,600 for Chee and Wong respectively disqualify them from contesting elections for five years. Evidently, these oppositionists see limited value in preserving eligibility for elections if all the other odds are routinely stacked against political competition. Elections without civil society have lost their attraction.

Chee's free speech challenge has the Government thinking. In what appears a knee-jerking exercise, the daily Straits Times recently published an article raising the possibility of a defined physical space for free speech. In a subsequent interview with The New York Times, Lee Kuan Yew indicated that something like Hyde Park Corner was a possibility for Singapore.

While some enthuse over such a prospect, this is a dangerous idea for oppositionists in Singapore. The risk is that a physically distinct area for political expression becomes an alternative, not a complement, to a generalised move towards free speech.

Interesting and worthwhile as it is, London's Hyde Park Corner is at best a political side-show. William Haig doesn't need to campaign there to get his message across, nor do the multitude of interest groups and social activists trying to influence public affairs and government in Britain.

In the Singapore context, what might result is a sort of "political zoo" which further marginalises and separates opposition from mainstream society. The fear of simplified surveillance on those entering the zone of free speech could also play on nervous Singaporeans.

Whatever transpires, Chee's bold stance seems to have the Government on the defensive. Arguably, he is having more political impact at the moment than Singapore's two elected MPs.

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