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## AN ANALYSIS OF SINGAPORE'S AWARE CASE

*Our case involves the women's group Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), founded on 25 November 1985, which has proven itself to be a tireless long-term campaigner for women's rights in Singapore. In this 'AWARE case', the executive committee of AWARE was surreptitiously taken over by fundamentalist Christian women from Church of Our Saviour at AWARE's 28 March 2009 Annual General Meeting. In the second phase of this saga, the Extraordinary General Meeting on 2 May 2009 led to the secular 'Old Guard' recapturing AWARE and the Church of Our Saviour group being removed from power. This AWARE case shows the rise in power of fundamentalist Protestant Christianity within Singapore and its growing influence upon English-educated Chinese-Singaporeans. The fact that this upper middle-class demographic traditionally has supported the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) is probably one key reason why the government decided not to intervene in this particular case as part of 'the more consultative style of government' first introduced by former PM Goh Chok Tong. The PAP government's non-intervention in the takeover and recapture is extremely significant given its past record of authoritarian micro-management of dissent and oppositional opinions. It suggests more freedom for some NGOs in the contemporary era of Lee Hsien Loong's prime-ministership. Significantly, PAP may be splitting into 'reformist' and 'hardline' factions headed by, respectively, Lee Hsien Loong and the MP for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC Mr Wong Kan Seng.*

**Keywords:** *Activism, Civil society, Grassroots activism, Internet activism, Non-Government Organizations, Opposition parties, Singapore politics, Singapore opposition parties.*

### Introduction

Our case involves the women's group Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), founded on 25 November 1985, which has proven itself to be a tireless long-term campaigner for women's rights in Singapore. It is

one of the more significant and high-profile NGOs presently operating within the city-state. In this 'AWARE case', the executive committee of AWARE was surreptitiously taken over by fundamentalist Christian women from *Church of Our Saviour* at AWARE's 28 March 2009 Annual General Meeting. In the second phase of this saga, the Extraordinary General Meeting held at Suntec City on 2 May 2009 led to the secular 'Old Guard' (as they became known in the mainstream and online media) recapturing AWARE and the *Church of Our Saviour* group (the 'New Guard') being removed from power. This AWARE case shows the rise in power of fundamentalist Protestant Christianity within Singapore and its growing influence upon English-educated Chinese-Singaporeans. The fact that this upper middle-class demographic *traditionally* has supported the ruling People's Action Party (人民行動黨) (PAP) is probably one key reason why the government decided not to intervene in this particular case as part of 'the more consultative style of government' first introduced by former PM Goh Chok Tong (1990-2004).<sup>1</sup>

We should also note that the PAP government actively encourages women to seek fulfilment and success in their careers (Lyons-Lee, 1998) and women's rights NGOs may be useful and empowering to women in this regard. Therefore, NGOs such as AWARE can be viewed as a key element within the government's broader economic and social strategies (Lyons, 2006, p. 5). All these reasons help us to explain the PAP government's non-intervention in the AWARE case as it was played out in the first half of calendar year 2009. The government's non-intervention in the takeover and recapture suggests more freedom for some NGOs in the contemporary era of Lee Hsien Loong's prime-ministership (2004-present). Significantly, PAP may be splitting into 'reformist' and 'hardline' factions headed by, respectively, Lee Hsien Loong and the MP for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC Mr Wong Kan Seng.

## Study background - Political context

For the broader research project of which this is a part we conducted 16 (out of 23 total) face-to-face interviews between 22 September 2009 and 6 May 2011. During this time period the combined Singaporean opposition held two seats in the Singaporean Parliament, Potong Pasir SMC held by Mr Chiam See Tong of the Singapore People's Party (新加坡人民黨) (hereafter SPP) and Hougang SMC held by Mr Low Thia Khiang of the Workers' Party of Singapore (新加坡工人黨) (hereafter WP). The remainder of the elected seats were held by PAP which maintained a complete monopoly in the Singaporean Parliament between 1968 and 1981 (Ang, 2011, p. 99; Chee, 2012, p. 392; Lee, 2012, p. 314).

SPP's Mr Chiam contested for SPP in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC at the 7 May 2011 General Election (hereafter GE) while his wife, Madam Lina Loh, contested in Potong Pasir SMC.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately both Chiams were unsuccessful

in their respective contests with Potong Pasir SMC being returned to PAP by a mere 114 votes (7,878 for SPP versus 7,992 for PAP) (Au Young and Durai, 2011; Hussain, 2011; Singapore-elections.com).<sup>3</sup> The 2011 GE campaign also saw Mr Low shift ground to Aljunied GRC where his five-person team was the first opposition team in Singaporean history to win a GRC (Ang, 2011, pp. 103-4; Lee, 2011, p. 245; Leong and Tan, 2011, p. 166; Ortmann, 2011, p. 153). Low's designated successor, Mr Yaw Shin Leong, recaptured Hougang SMC for WP, with a 2.06 percentage-point swing in his party's favour (Kor and Chong, 2011). Overall at the 2011 GE, WP scored a creditable 46.58% of valid votes in contested constituencies (swing towards WP 8.15 percentage-points).

Hougang SMC was subjected to a by-election on 26 May 2012 after Mr Yaw was fired by WP for failing to clarify allegations relating to his alleged personal indiscretions (Anonymous, 2013b). This 2012 by-election saw WP's Mr Png Eng Huat (ex-East Coast GRC team) win the seat but the swing towards PAP was 2.72 percentage-points. Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) 2011 GE candidate Mr Patrick Lee Song Juan claimed that Mr Yaw's fall was not a major blow for WP because Yaw was only Low's designated successor in Hougang SMC and not in the party (personal interview, 28 March 2012). At a second 26 January 2013 by-election, WP's Ms Lee Li Lian comfortably won Punggol East SMC thus proving the new strength of the WP brand-name at least in the eastern part of the island (swing towards WP 13.49 percentage-points). Arguably this 2013 by-election has now created a situation in Singapore where most seats are a fifty-fifty chance of going either way. However, firstly, such a theory has not yet been tested at a GE. Secondly, seats in the western part of the island, where WP strategically does not contest, have been and remain today much less fertile ground for the opposition.

## **Research method and data sources**

The data sources for the present study are literature search, participant-observation, and semi-structured interviews. Twenty-three (23) people were interviewed in person for the broader research project of which this is a part (four of those interviewed twice) plus ten (10) interview responses were sent and returned by e-mail. Four (4) people who sent e-mail responses were also interviewed in person so the total number of respondents is twenty-nine (29). The broader research project is a study of the Singaporean opposition as a 'group-for-itself' (to use the term often attributed incorrectly to Karl Marx) from a holistic perspective which explores such topics as history and philosophy of the movement and its key players; main strategies of the movement; and expectations and predictions for the future. Interviewees were chosen primarily using 'purposeful' or 'convenience' sampling where one interviewee would provide the researcher (first-mentioned author) with a

contact name(s) who would then become the next interviewee, etc. Contacts for interviews were also gained through the networking which occurred at opposition party functions. In order to expose himself to diverse perspectives and expectations, the researcher aimed to interview people across different age ranges, genders, and party affiliations. One important aim of the research was to be neutral between the opposition parties. The researcher also aimed to interview a cross-section of both ‘politicians’ (defined as those who have contested in at least one past election campaign and/or hold an official party leadership position) and ‘activists’ (broadly defined). Appendix A lists all the study’s interviewees who were interviewed in-person. Only one name has been altered. The other participants consent to their names being released here. The deaf community activist Mr Wong U-Wen was met in person by the researcher and the interview was asked and answered through the exchange of written notes.

We use interviews as the primary source of data and we study only oppositional and not pro-government activists as recommended by Gomez (2008, p. 592, p. 610, n. 1) in his study of the use of the internet by Singaporean activists. Soon and Kluver (2007, pp. 259, 260) and Gomez (2008, p. 592) both suggest that the use of interviews rather than, or as well as, content analysis of publicly available data such as websites will suggest reasons why actions were taken and suggest paths not taken but which were once considered possible. As most Singaporean political research focuses exclusively or primarily upon PAP studies focusing on the opposition are needed to highlight detail, context, and motivations. The opposition should not be dismissed in just a few sentences of generalizations in the midst of PAP-centric literature (Lyons and Gomez, 2005). Instead researchers should ‘look beyond the PAP’ (Lyons and Gomez, 2005, p. 129). Gomez (2008, p. 610, n. 1) explains that ‘[t]here is very little research on opposition parties in Singapore because self-censorship and caution keep researchers away from this aspect of the city-state’s politics’.

The interview questions posed to all respondents were as follows:

1. Explain the events in your life that caused you to become an opposition supporter.
2. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition party you are most closely associated with?
3. What do you think will happen to Singapore politics in next 10-15 years and how many seats will the opposition win at next election?
4. What do you think of Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) Youth and internet political activism?
5. What do the opposition parties need to do to go from 25% to 50.1% and what type of people make up that next 25% that the opposition must win over?

When some respondents chose to ad-lib and provide extra information and perspectives on the recently concluded 2009 AWARE case it was then decided to write a separate article on this case due to the importance of the topic from an objective perspective.

Participant-observation includes the first-mentioned author's attendance at Singapore Democratic Party's (新加坡民主黨) (SDP) 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner held on 27 February 2010 and SDP's 31<sup>st</sup> Anniversary Dinner held on 19 February 2011. This author also attended the election night count and press conference with SDP politicians and supporters held at the Quality Hotel (Balestier Road) on the night of 7-8 May 2011. This researcher also visited and photographed the SDP's offices located in Jalan Gelenggang, just off Upper Thomson Road, in Singapore's suburban north (see Figures 1-3).

### **An analysis of the AWARE case**

We now present the AWARE case study which we believe is indicative of new trends in Singapore civil society and the government's changing attitudes with respect to some (but probably not all) NGOs. What is interesting in this case is the non-intervention of the PAP government which decided to let events take their natural course (Anonymous, 2009). We explore possible reasons for this strategy in this sub-section. We classify the government's (in)actions as 'non-intervening' (see also Chua, B.H., 2011, p. 23; Ghani and Koh, 2011, pp. 39, 42; Loh, 2011, p. 102) because no-one was arrested or jailed or fined (unlike in *Operation Spectrum* aka the 'Marxist Conspiracy' case of 1987) and no organization was shut down.<sup>4</sup>

However, the Singaporean legal scholar Thio Li Ann (2009, p. 393) claims that the government did choose to become 'involved' because its ministers / MPs PM Lee; the then DPM Mr Wong Kang Seng; the then Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (CDYS) Mr Vivian Balakrishnan; MP Mr Sin Boon Ann; and MP Mr Lim Biow Chuan made public statements about the case (see, for example, MHA, 2009). Thio (2009, p. 404) argues that, legally speaking, such ministerial public statements are especially important within the uniquely Singaporean context<sup>5</sup> because 'non-justiciable soft norms are legally relevant as authoritative if imprecise guidelines, drawing their authority from an "efficient" parliamentary government within the context of a dominant party state'. In other words, Thio (2009) is claiming that parliamentary speeches and ministerial documents have more legal weight and gravitas in a nation where one party dominates the Parliament and most other aspects of social, economic, and political life. The Internal Security Department (ISD) also allegedly held private discussions with Archbishop Dr John Chew of the National Council of Churches Singapore and with other religious leaders at perceived crisis points in the AWARE saga (Chong, 2011b, p. 10; Ghani and Koh, 2011, p. 44; Tan, 2011, p. 55).

We concur with Thio (2009, p. 393) that the PAP government's role this time around was as 'peace-keeper' and not as 'adjudicator' in this 'culture war fracas'. Non-involvement here in the sense that we use the term is consistent with the 'more consultative style of government' which previous PM Goh Chok Tong claims that he introduced (Ghani and Koh, 2011, p. 44; Goh, 2003, p. 16). For example, in his 2003 *National Day Rally* speech, Goh (2003, p. 16) claimed that 'I have ... put in place a more consultative style of government, and opened up more political and civic space for Singaporeans'.

As mentioned, AWARE has proven itself to be a 'tireless' (Leong, 2012, p. 59) long-term campaigner for women's rights in Singapore. It has been officially approved by the Singaporean Government (Chua, B.H., 2011, p. 21; Rodan, 1996) as not being a threat to PAP's overall hegemony within the city-state. Chua (1995, p. 208) writes that AWARE's demands 'do not challenge the fundamental premise of the regime although they do bring out anomalies in existing state practices'. The reasons for this official approval can only be suggested. Firstly, AWARE is not class-based and has no obvious working-class agenda. Secondly, it is largely content to 'work within the system' like opposition party parliamentarians Mr Chiam and Mr Low (Lyons, 2007, p. 111). Thirdly, the PAP government actively encourages women to seek fulfilment and success in their careers (Lyons-Lee, 1998) and women's rights NGOs may be useful and empowering to women in this regard. Therefore, such NGOs can be viewed as a key element within the government's broader economic and social strategies (Lyons, 2006, p. 5). Women's empowerment can be an issue which is approached other than in class (struggle) terms. (Two early and influential writers on communism Friedrich Engels (1884) and Vladimir Lenin (1919, 1920a, 1920b) wrote material on women's rights and emancipation. However, their ideas have since been debated and revised.) Fourthly, PAP is concerned with the migration of graduate women to countries with more democratic rights and deeper civil societies such as Australia and New Zealand (Goh, 2010, p. 79). Fifthly, PAP is probably aware that groups such as AWARE tend to attract a high percentage of middle-class educated graduate women (Lyons, 2000, p. 79) and, based on the senior Lee's steadfast belief in eugenics (Lyons, 2000, p. 68; Lyons-Lee, 1998), these are the ones that PAP believes Singapore needs to form its present and future meritocratic elites. Consistent with our theory presented here, civil society activist Roderick Chia (personal interview, 4 March 2010) confirmed that the takeover coup-makers were 'all ethnic Chinese [in] management positions, mostly private sector', i.e. part of the meritocratic elite. Devasahayam (2011, p. 126) writes that 'the takeover was conducted exclusively by Chinese, middle class, Christian women'. More generally, Lyons (2000, p. 79) reports that 65% of AWARE members were at the turn of the last century employed in professional, technical, administrative, executive, and managerial positions (middle-class); 22% in clerical, sales, and service areas (working-class); and 13% not employed for a wage.



The AWARE case facts come from our interviewee the civil society activist Roderick Chia (personal interview, 4 March 2010), Anonymous (2009), Chew (2010), Chong (2011a), Thio (2009), and the posting on the blog *Bread Crumbs and Candy Cottage* (2009). In this 'AWARE case', the executive committee (hereafter 'exco') of AWARE was 'surreptitiously taken over' (Anonymous, 2009, p 55) by fundamentalist Christian women from *Church of Our Saviour* (Chong, 2011a, p. 566) at AWARE's 28 March 2009 Annual General Meeting (Chew, 2010). Over 100 people attended, instead of the expected 30 or 40, and nine out of twelve exco spots went to the fundamentalist newcomers (*Bread Crumbs and Candy Cottage*, 2009; Leong, 2012, p. 60; Thio, 2009, p. 387). Anonymous (2009, p. 55) states that: '[h]alf of the new council attend the same church' (i.e. six women (Thio, 2009, p. 390)). It was investigative research done by *The Straits Times* which led to the discovery and announcement of this information as well as various other facts concerning the backgrounds of the new exco members (Leong, 2012, pp. 61, 64). The *Church of Our Saviour* and these women believe that Christians are called to infiltrate secular organizations so as to direct the policies of these organizations towards more godly ends (Roderick Chia, personal interview, 4 March 2010). This practise, known as 'steeple-jacking' (Chong, 2011a, p. 568; Culver and Dorhauser, 2007), is based on similar ideologies of low-church Protestant evangelicals in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and USA. Roderick stated that the *Church of Our Saviour* women were specifically influenced by South Korean Protestant evangelicals. These Christian women were of the opinion that AWARE had begun to support too openly the so-called secular-progressive 'gay and lesbian agenda' (Anonymous, 2009; Goh, 2010, p. 83). As Chew (2010, p. A34) writes, the secular 'Old Guard' (now the 'New New Guard' after their success in recapturing power at the 2 May 2009 EGM) was accused of taking a 'pro-homosexuality stance in its sex education course for teenagers' (see also Chong, 2011a, p. 567; Goh, 2010, p. 83).

This AWARE case shows the rise in power of fundamentalist Protestant Christianity within Singapore and its growing influence upon English-educated Chinese-Singaporeans. The fact that this upper middle-class demographic *traditionally* has supported PAP is probably one key reason why the government decided not to intervene in this particular case as part of 'the more consultative style of government' first introduced by then PM Goh. Although the election of fundamentalists to the board of AWARE took place legally (Chong, 2011a, p. 579, 2011c, p. 33; Tan, 2011, p. 70, n. 4), it was a 'surreptitious takeover' (Anonymous, 2009, p. 55) or 'hostile takeover' (Goh, 2010, p. 83) or 'takeover' (MHA, 2009) or 'covert hostile takeover' (Chang, 2012, p. 202), an 'infiltration' (Chang, 2012, p. 202) by 'stealth' (Mr Alex Au cited in Anonymous, 2009, p 55), a 'bloodless coup' (Anonymous, 2009, p 55), a 'covert plot' (Loh, 2011, p. 100), an 'illegitimate coup' (Leong, 2012, p. 61), an 'ill-fated raid' (Anonymous, 2009, p 55), an 'unethical infiltration'

(Lai, 2011, p. 151) or a ‘usurpation of power’ (Leong, 2012, p. 61) conducted by a ‘secretive group’ (Anonymous, 2009, p 55) in ‘the one biggest uncivil act of all’ (Lai, 2011, p. 151).<sup>6</sup>

The takeover genuinely surprised and ‘shocked’ (Roderick Chia’s word) the original secular board and the membership of AWARE as well as Singaporean society as a whole. The original secular board then mounted its own campaign to retake power and it tabled a no-confidence motion which then forced an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) (Anonymous, 2009). At the seven-hour long (Chong, 2011a, p. 567; Thio, 2009, p. 391) EGM, held at Suntec City’s Exhibition Hall 402 on 2 May 2009 (Anonymous, 2009; Chong, 2011a, p. 567; Leong, 2012, p. 64), the ‘Old Guard’ was reinstated (Anonymous, 2009) by 1,414 votes to 761 votes (Chew, 2010; Chong, 2011a, pp. 567-8; Leong, 2012, p. 64).

Many Singaporeans were surprised that the government did not intervene in this case. Lyons (2000, p. 71) writes that: ‘[f]ear of being “closed down” or de-registered is constant within the [AWARE] organisation, particularly amongst older members’. Many AWARE members believe their group was fortunate to escape arrests and the forced closure of their organization during the *Operation Spectrum* investigations (even though AWARE did not comment on those investigations) (Barr, 2010, p. 360; Lyons, 2000, p. 82, n. 2, 2006, p. 6, 2007, p. 112). We can only conclude that the AWARE case reveals, regardless of the government’s own specific motives which are probably complex, that there is a new freedom for certain NGOs to operate within Singapore and that they will be allowed to fight at least some of their own internal and external battles without government intervention. In his 15 May *Press Release* DPM Wong stated in MHA (2009) that ‘[t]he Government has been very careful in its comments, especially before the EOGM, as it did not want to be misunderstood as taking sides’.

Despite ‘the more consultative style of government’ introduced by PM Goh, it is probable that only a few select organizations will be given the privilege of fighting their own internal and external battles minus government intervention. It is unlikely that an obviously left-wing or working-class organization would be granted the same freedoms (Goh, 2010, p. 71; Lyons, 2007, p. 111). We recall the persecution campaign against social justice and human rights advocates called *Operation Spectrum* when the senior Lee (Mr. Lee Kuan Yew) was still PM.<sup>7</sup> As the Singaporean sociology-of-religion scholar Daniel Goh (2010, p. 71) writes: ‘The detained activists’ liberal Asian theological views also challenged the state’s national discourse by connecting local worker experiences to the larger confluences of working-class experiences in developing Asia’. The PAP government would permit no ‘suffering servants’ to escape from the written pages of Isaiah chapter 53 into Singapore’s workplaces or into the national consciousness regarding the same. Would Goh Chok Tong’s ‘more consultative’ government have launched



*Operation Spectrum*? It is hard to say. However, neither Goh nor any of his second- or third-generation cabinet colleagues have ever formally apologized for the government's actions. Regarding *Operation Spectrum* PM Goh made the statement that '[a]ll of us were [sic] satisfied that the sixteen were indeed involved in some nefarious activity' (*Business Times*, 30 July 1987, cited in Barr, 2010, p. 352). In fact, Goh took on personal responsibility by ordering the re-arrests of some of the detainees in the following year (Barr, 2010, p. 352; Yap et al., 2009, p. 440). As Lyons and Gomez (2005, p. 129) stress, 'any assessment of "greater openness" requires sustained attention to the recent past'. Similarly, Gomez (2005, p. 199) reminds us that local activists' fear of linking with international groups is logical based on 'the measures that the PAP government ... [has] taken over the years to restrict civil society expression'. Organizations which profess to be apolitical but insist on defending human rights (as that term is defined in the west (Gomez, 2005, p. 178)) will probably continue to face difficulties in Singapore.

Furthermore, the government historically has been extremely uncomfortable with groups and individuals, such as the *Operation Spectrum* actors of 1987, who 'display a capacity to operate across many levels of society with great independence and a strong sense of invulnerability' (Barr, 2010, p. 355). Peter Chang (2012, p. 202) summarizes the current situation well when he writes that '[t]he existence of these draconian legal instruments [*Internal Security Act (ISA)*, Section 377A of the Penal Code, and severe restrictions on public protests] together with the PAP ruling regime's high aversion to social-political unrest combine to make Singapore a tricky terrain for activists'. Furthermore, Chang (2012, p. 203) makes it clear that 'the PAP regime is not ready for more strident forms of citizen-state engagement typical of western liberal democracies'. We should also remember that 'response to criticism has always been a consistent political stance of the PAP' (Gomez, 2005, p. 198).

In this AWARE case, the EGM at Suntec City led to 'the old guard ... recaptur[ing] AWARE' (MHA, 2009) and the *Church of our Saviour* group being removed from power (Anonymous, 2009; Thio, 2009, p. 392). The government made no attempt to intervene at this point either. Roderick suggested that the sub-standard behaviour of various individuals at this EGM (see also MHA, 2009) was one factor that caused the government not to directly intervene. It did not want to become 'guilty by association'. Although it is easy to attribute cynical motivations to the government here, Roderick stressed that there is a genuine diversity of opinion on certain social issues even within the Singaporean approved elite. Roderick pointed out another interesting fact in the media debates on the 'fundamentalist takeover' issue. The two main media agencies in Singapore, both government-approved (Chee, 2005, pp. 99-100; Gomez, 2008, p. 593; Seow, 1998), had a different take on the issue with *The Straits Times* being more favourably disposed towards the original secular AWARE leadership and *TODAY* newspaper (owned by MediaCorp) being

more favourably disposed towards the *Church of Our Saviour* group. *The Straits Times* is home to some of Singapore's more liberal English-educated progressive people among the approved elite, including gays and progressive people sympathetic to the gay and lesbian agenda, and so its stance regarding the Christian coup is not surprising. By contrast, *TODAY* has advertisements from fundamentalist churches and features American Protestant evangelical James Dobson's *Focus on the Family*. C.K. Loh (2011, pp. 99-100), the News Editor at *TODAY*, has written as follows: 'The free sheet [*TODAY*], which had to play catch up on the story, consciously took a more detached approach, focusing on the issues (including AWARE's sexuality education programme in schools) and not on personalities – a practical approach given its manpower limitations'. The issue of the Ministry of Education (MOE) withdrawing its support for the controversial sexuality education programme was a secondary and later issue which *TODAY*, being behind *The Straits Times* and playing catch-up, was in a good position to cover in more detail. This issue also allowed a more socially conservative reporting slant to be pursued. Roderick referred to *The Straits Times* as being 'biased against the fundamentalists' (personal interview, 4 March 2010). He concluded that '[t]here was a clear differentiation in their coverage because each organization has autonomy'.

Roderick outlined what he perceived to be the main implications of the AWARE case as follows:

“There are certain currents in Singaporean society that are slowly changing. This is the first time something like this has happened in Singapore: a tolerated civil society organization taken over by Christians of a type growing in Singapore. ... [The] interesting situation [is] where AWARE is still linked to the state but it [the state] did not give overt help. This is my overall judgement and analysis. The state let things play out, nudged along by the [mainstream] media. Singapore has been declared a secular state - though it is a religious culture - but we are not sure now where the lines are drawn. What happens if an NGO with ambivalent relation to the state is taken over by Christians? It reflects society itself becoming more religious. Is Singapore becoming a post-secular society? There are gay people who are Christians and Christians in secular society who are secularist, Christians who have their own steeple-jacking activities, and Christians who do their own private religion. Many Christians spoke against the fundamentalists” [personal interview, 4 March 2010].

Dr Thio Li Ann (2009, pp. 396, 405, p. 393, n. 217), daughter of the 'self-proclaimed "feminist mentor"' (Chua, B.H., 2011, p. 22) to the 'New Guard' Dr Thio Su Mien, prefers to view the case as 'social conservatives' versus 'secular

activists' / 'sexual libertarians' rather than as a 'fundamentalist takeover'. She argues that the words 'coup' and 'takeover' as used in *The Straits Times* (and *The Economist*) were too emotionally charged and contributed to moral panic (Thio, 2009, pp. 394-5, 405, p. 396, n. 232). However, Thio (2009) ignores the fact that even the socially conservative DPM Wong in his 15 March *Press Release* (MHA, 2009) called the 'Old Guard's removal a 'takeover' and referred to 'the old guard ... recaptur[ing] AWARE'. Thio (2009, p. 396, n. 232) also points out that the coup did not break AWARE's constitution or any of the country's laws which is a true statement on both counts (see also Chong, 2011a, p. 579, 2011c, p. 33; Sin Boon Ann, MP for Tampines GRC, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 86 [27 May 2009] [Debate on President's Address]; Tan, 2011, p. 70, n. 4). She points to the bias of *The Straits Times* against the 'New Guard' but not the bias of *TODAY* against the 'Old Guard'. However, she cites only seven *TODAY* articles but 32 *Straits Times* articles. Thio (2009, pp. 388, 394-6, 399, 405) argues that secular sexual-libertarians can foment trouble by playing the 'religious card' when they attribute (allegedly problematic) religious motives to actors in secular dramas. In other words, Thio asks (2009) why did the Christian backgrounds and affiliations of the 'New Guard' need to be brought into the debate at all? Why not position the debate as simply 'sexual libertarians' versus 'sexual conservatives'? Thio (2009, p. 391) is also in agreement with Roderick's above-quoted statement that '[m]any Christians spoke against the fundamentalists' (see also Chua, D. et al., 2011, p. 88; Hussain and Wong, 2009 cited in Theo, 2009, p. 391, n. 206; Tan, 2011, p. 70, n. 3).<sup>8</sup> Therefore, a characterization of the case as the Christian worldview versus the non-Christian worldview is surely too simplistic. DPM Wong also stated in MHA (2009) that the fundamentalist takeover was disconcerting for many Christians 'who believed [and Thio (2009) might well disagree here] that this [overt takeover] was an unwise move in a multi-racial, multi-religious society'.

We conclude our discussion of the AWARE case by noting that appearances (which might suggest benevolence and a soft hand by the third-generation PAP leaders in contrast to the legendary 'iron fist' of Lee Kuan Yew) can deceive western observers. Instead, the freedom granted to AWARE should be viewed as being largely the result of its objectives being broadly consistent with the current-day agenda of the PAP. We do not want to contribute to the existing literature's 'romance of "more" civil society as ballast against coercive state power' (Lyons and Gomez, 2005, p. 121). In other words, AWARE should clearly make the most of its moment in the sun.

### **An analysis of PAP factions**

Our interviewee Roderick Chia discussed the alleged division of PAP today into, roughly, a 'hardline' faction and a 'reformist' faction (to use the terms

of Soviet Union political analysis from the Khrushchev era through to the Gorbachev era). Roderick noted that, on social issues, PAP's reformist faction centres on the current PM Lee Hsien Loong whereas the hardline faction centres on Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC's Mr Wong Kan Seng, the former Deputy Prime Minister (2005-11), the former Minister for Home Affairs (1994-2010), and the former Co-ordinating Minister for National Security (2010-11). Roderick pointed out that although, obviously, both of the alleged factions believe that PAP's hegemony over all aspects of Singaporean society should remain unchanged and unchallenged, the reformists are willing to provide some freedom of choice and expression on social issues such as consensual homosexuality (still a criminal offence in Singapore under Section 377A of the Penal Code (Chang, 2012, p. 203; Hor, 2012, p. 45)).<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the hardliners would prefer that PAP's traditional conservative positions be maintained. NGO activists connected to and not connected to the opposition parties will continue to lobby for further freedoms in the area of lifestyle choices. The key battleground areas will continue to include repeal of both the *Internal Security Act (ISA)* and Section 377A (Chang, 2012, p. 205). However, oppositional people remain divided as to how aggressive and confrontational lobbying efforts should be.

Echoing WP's former Treasurer and 2006 and 2011 East Coast GRC candidate Eric Tan (personal interview, 3 March 2010) and SDP's Assistant Secretary-General John L. Tan (personal interview, 22 September 2009), Roderick argued that it is unlikely that the passing away of the senior Lee (who recently celebrated his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday) will lead to mass instability and paralysis within PAP. However, Roderick accepted that this could occur as certain non-conformist views may have gone unexpressed under the present system. In Roderick's words:

“If LKY passes on ... [and] it is not so much orders from one man, this is not apparent – but which factions within the PAP become dominant. This is partly speculation and partly based on conversations. There are the hardliners and the reformers. When I say hardliners and reformers, they both want the PAP to be the hegemony. The difference would be in liberalizing certain aspects of society such as doing away with Section 377A of the Penal Code [which] deals with criminalization of homosexual acts including consensual homosexual acts. This has not been used much but has been called by some activists [the] Sword of Damocles hanging over their heads. [Authors' note: Chang (2012, p. 203) refers to it as 'a threat hanging over the gay community'.] This is a holdover from the British colonial laws that the UK itself has long done away with. It reflects a certain conservatism of Singaporean culture and the political culture of ruling elites. This is an example of what [the] reformers would want to do away with. The differences are

social and [in terms of] culture not in terms of the political system. ... You could also say there is no clear or hard evidence about factions. There are stories going around that factions exist" [personal interview, 4 March 2010].

## Conclusion

Our case involves the women's group Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), founded on 25 November 1985, which has proven itself to be a tireless long-term campaigner for women's rights in Singapore. In this 'AWARE case', the executive committee of AWARE was surreptitiously taken over by fundamentalist Christian women from *Church of Our Saviour* at AWARE's 28 March 2009 Annual General Meeting. In the second phase of this saga, the Extraordinary General Meeting held at Suntec City on 2 May 2009 led to the secular 'Old Guard' recapturing AWARE and the *Church of Our Saviour* group being removed from power. This AWARE case shows the rise in power of fundamentalist Protestant Christianity within Singapore and its growing influence upon English-educated Chinese-Singaporeans. The fact that this upper middle-class demographic *traditionally* has supported the ruling PAP is probably one key reason why the government decided not to intervene in this particular case as part of 'the more consultative style of government' first introduced by former PM Goh Chok Tong (1990-2004). The government's non-intervention in the takeover suggests more freedom for some NGOs in the contemporary era of Lee Hsien Loong's prime-ministership (2004-present). However, this is certainly not extended to all NGOs and it is suggested that NGOs and activists tread very carefully given PAP's track record since independence of discouraging the emergence of civil society. Significantly, PAP may be splitting into 'reformist' and 'hardline' factions headed by, respectively, Lee Hsien Loong and the MP for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC Mr Wong Kan Seng.

Since the 2009 events described in this paper, the government has alternated between relaxing and tightening restrictions on civil society and online activism. It has been dismayed by the hostility of the anti-PAP sentiments expressed by a large proportion of the online activist community. In response, online PAP supporters have galvanized and have become more entrenched and strident in defending their preferred party from attack. Much of the debate has been a sensible and necessary re-debate of the PAP's and opposition's respective interpellated positions within the nation's imagined past and present. However, at times, nastiness and childishness have characterized large sections of online discussions with the ideologies of pro- and anti-camps having largely become entrenched and reductive. Recently, 27-year-old Ms Nicole Seah, a popular National Solidarity Party (NSP) candidate at the 2011 GE, wrote publicly via Facebook about breaking down under the pressures of life (which

included stomach cancer) and even of receiving rape and death-threats from PAP supporters (Seah, 2013). Mentioning these threats does not of course imply that opposition supporters have been blameless. The foreign-worker issue has also risen its head lately in part due to campaigns by NSP 2011 GE candidate Gilbert Goh, with the tone of the debate in some quarters becoming nasty and veering away from reasoned critique of government policies towards a generalized hostility towards foreigners (in the same way that the nuanced social and political critique of 1970s British punk rock was later subverted by neo-Nazi bands such as the late Ian Stuart Donaldson's Skrewdriver).<sup>10</sup>

The PAP government has tightened up recently by proposing new restrictions on websites offering regular political news. Lovells and Kennedy (2013) outline the new rules:

“Online news sites must now apply for an individual licence (“Licence”) from the MDA [Media Development Authority of Singapore] if, over a period of two months, they:

- a. are visited by at least 50,000 unique IP addresses from Singapore each month; and
- b. publish on average at least one article per week on news and current affairs of Singapore (which includes any news, intelligence, report of occurrence or any matter of public interest, about any social, economic, political, cultural, artistic, sporting, scientific or other aspect of Singapore) ...

Online news sites that are granted a Licence will be required to remove any content that is found by the MDA to be in breach of its standards, i.e. prohibited content, within twenty-four hours. The online news sites will also be required to put up a performance bond of SG\$50,000 (about US\$ 39,784 or HK\$ 308,830), which may be forfeited if the MDA regulations are breached”.

Needless to say, these proposed rules have been strongly opposed by opposition parties and opposition activists (see, for example, Ng, 2013; Philemon, 2013). In activist Ravi Philemon's (2013) words: ‘The online world is the most open “public square” Singaporeans have for public discourse, and this new licensing framework for online news sites is a great impediment to this’. There was a 24-hour online ‘blackout’ protest against the rules on 6 June 2013 launched by 150 websites, including the oppositional *The Online Citizen*, and a physical-world protest took place in Hong Lim Park on 8 June 2013 (Lovells and Kennedy, 2013). The 24-hour deadline to remove material deemed objectionable and the S\$50,000 performance bond have been the two specific provisions which have attracted most criticism. Smaller websites run by individuals or small organizations may be unable to find the money to put up such a significant



lump-sum performance bond. If the MDA issues a site with a formal notice requiring it to obtain a licence and the site refuses then maximum penalties of fines of up to S\$200,000 and three-years imprisonment apply (Lovells and Kennedy, 2013).

As a second sign of recent government tightening up towards dissent and oppositional opinions, The High Court has given the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) permission to launch a contempt of court claim against gay activist 61-year-old Alex Au (the administrator of the *Yawning Bread* blog and the author of *People Like Us: Sexual Minorities in Singapore*).<sup>11</sup> Sim (2013) updates the situation as follows: 'The High Court yesterday [27 November 2013] granted permission for contempt of court action to be taken against blogger Alex Au Wai Pang, but only for one of two articles which had been flagged by the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC)'. Conservative Facebook online commentator Bryan Ti has suggested that the police are distressed by the sexual activities Au has allegedly allowed in his gay sauna baths and the contempt of court charge may reflect the fact that he has been under the government's radar for a considerable period of time and for a variety of matters. In Ti's words on 26 November: '[H]e allowed people to frolic naked un [*sic*] mass orgies and the police was not too happy'.<sup>12</sup> Ti himself comments: 'It's Singapore which deserves a break, from Alex's rubbish. He needs the law to straighten him out'.<sup>13</sup> British author Alan Shadrake was jailed for six weeks and fined S\$20,000 in 2011 for accusing Singapore's courts in his book of succumbing to political pressure and favouring the rich over the poor (Malay Mail Online, 2013).

Ti's comments cited here hint at the quasi-feudalistic approach of the PAP government whereby opposition politicians and activists have been traditionally divided into 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' categories by the ruling regime. The verdict of acceptability or otherwise has been based primarily upon senior government ministers' subjective assessments of 'character'. For example, the late J.B. Jeyaretnam (1926-2008), Dr Chee Soon Juan, and Tang Liang Hong have traditionally been viewed as 'unacceptable' politicians whereas Low Thia Khiang and Chiam See Tong have been viewed as 'acceptable' politicians. When you are viewed as an 'unacceptable' politician in Singapore then anything you later say or do is tarred with the same brush. Many younger voters have become increasingly disillusioned by the unfairness of this approach and have viewed it quite reasonably as a case of 'playing the man rather than the ball'.

## End Notes

- 1 We follow the conventional naming practice in Singapore of placing the Chinese family-name in front of Chinese given names (but not initials) (hence Goh Chok Tong rather than Chok Tong Goh for Mr

Goh).

- 2 A Group Representative Constituency (GRC) is a large electoral area where teams of four, five or six opposition candidates compete against the same number of PAP candidates. The GRC system was ostensibly designed to allow for minority ethnic group representation in parliament as each GRC team had to comprise at least one member of Singapore's ethnic minority communities ('Malay' or 'Indian' / 'Other') (Chua, 1995, p. 122; Lyons, 2000, pp. 76-7). The remaining electorates are smaller SMCs (or Single Member Constituencies). The Electoral Boundaries Review Committee report, released on 24 February 2011, increased the number of SMCs to twelve (Anonymous, 2013a).
- 3 Voting results for the 2011 GE were taken from *The Sunday Times (Singapore)*, 8 May 2011 (noon physical edition), pp. H9-H12. These were later checked with finalized results on [www.Singapore-elections.com](http://www.Singapore-elections.com) and changes made where necessary.
- 4 The 'Marxist Conspiracy' case (Barr, 2010; Lee, 2012, p. 307; Lyons, 2000, p. 82, n. 2; Seow, 1994, 1998; Thio, 2009, pp. 377, 386-7) involved 22 mostly Roman Catholic social workers who were arrested under the *ISA* on 21 May / 20 June 1987 for allegedly acting 'in a manner prejudicial to the security of Singapore by being involved in a Marxist conspiracy to subvert the existing social and political system in Singapore, using communist united front tactics, with a view to establishing a Marxist state' (Ministry of Home Affairs's statement served on the detainee Ms Teo Soh Lung, 1987, cited in Lee, 2012, p. 307).
- 5 Singaporean opposition activists often use the term 'uniquely Singaporean reality' to refer to Singapore's special political situation. It is a pun on the 'uniquely Singapore' campaign run by the Singapore Tourism Board and a good example of subversion by the appropriation of a (shallow) ruling-regime slogan for (serious) oppositional purposes.
- 6 Lai (2011) provides the most detailed eyewitness account of the events of the EGM which has been made public so far. Her account is interesting and important since she is a Christian who openly supported the secular 'Old Guard' whilst openly opposing the Christian 'New Guard'.
- 7 At the time of *Operation Spectrum* in 1987 it was unacceptable in the eyes of the PAP government for NGOs or religious groups to advocate for the interests of foreign workers (Lyons, 2007, pp. 109, 112, 116). There may be slightly more freedom available now as indicated by the advocacy efforts of the Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) NGO. Lyons (2007, p. 117) notes that '[I]ike AWARE, the TWC2 has

adopted a cautious and conciliatory approach in its dealings with the state'. For a discussion of NGO involvement in foreign worker advocacy see Lyons (2007).

8 These Christians include Archbishop Dr John Chew of the National Council of Churches Singapore and 'Old Guard' supporter Lai Ah Eng (2011).

9 The maximum period of imprisonment under Section 377A is two years. For a discussion of the use and non-use of Section 377A (and alternative statutory provisions) by public prosecutors see Hor (2012).

10 See the analysis provided about the foreign worker debate in the researcher's 23 October 2013 interview with activist Roy Sexiespider at the following link: <http://joochiatroadonline.blogspot.com/2013/10/interview-my-interview-with-activist-roy.html> [accessed 29 November 2013].

11 The AGC also serves the role which in other countries is usually filled by an Office of Public Prosecution.

12 <https://www.facebook.com/Ti.Bryan> [accessed 29 November 2013].

13 *Ibid.*

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## Appendix A

People interviewed in-person:

- 1 Dr. Wong Wee Nam (ex-NSP / SDP), 1 March 2010, personal interview\* (P)
- 2 Dr Marvin Leong Seong Kwok (SDP), 2 March 2010, personal interview (A)
- 3 Eric Tan Heng Chong (ex-WP), 3 March 2010, personal interview (P)
- 4 Roderick Chia (activist), 4 March 2010, personal interview (A)
- 5 Jaslyn Go (SDP), 22 September 2009, group interview (A)
- 6 Seelan Palay (SDP), 22 September 2009, group interview (A)
- 7 Jarrod Luo (ex-SDP), 22 September 2009, group interview and 2011, personal interview (P)

- 8 Yap Puay Tong (activist), 4 March 2010, group interview (A)
- 9 Renarda Yoch (activist) (real name suppressed), 4 March 2010, group interview (A)
- 10 Patrick Lee Song Juan (SDA), 6 October 2011 personal interview\* and 28 March 2012 personal interview\* (P)
- 11 Goh Meng Seng (ex-NSP), 15 October 2010 personal interview (P)
- 12 Dr. Chee Soon Juan (SDP), 14 October 2010 personal interview (P)
- 13 John L. Tan (SDP), 22 September 2009 personal interview and 2011 personal interview (P)
- 14 Chee Siok Chin (SDP), group interview (P)
- 15 Dr. James Gomez (ex-WP / SDP), 10 January 2011 personal interview (P)
- 16 Wong U-Wen (activist), one-hour exchange of written notes (A)
- 17 Yaw Shin Leong (ex-WP), 5 October 2011 personal interview\* (P)
- 18 Yee Jenn Jong (WP), 6 October 2011 personal interview\* (P)
- 19 Desmond Lim Bak Chuan (SJP / SDA), 6 October 2011 personal interview\* (P)
- 20 Ravi Philemon (NSP), 29 March 2012 personal interview\* (A)
- 21 Singa Crew (activist), 4 October 2011 personal interview\* (A)
- 22 Rachel Zeng (activist), 29 April 2013 personal interview\* (A)
- 23 Jam Cruisers (activist), 21 June 2013 personal interview\* (A)

(A)= activist (n = 11), (P) = politician (n = 12)

\* indicates the interview transcript appears on the first-mentioned author's blog *Joo Chiat Road Online* at <http://joochiatroadonline.blogspot.com>

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