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SOCIAL CAPITAL AND STATE-CIVIL SOCIETY RELATIONS IN SINGAPORE

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CONTENTS

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ABSTRACT

As Singapore enters the 21st Century, its political leaders are keenly aware of the need to prepare its people and institutions for the increasing competition, complexity, and change of the knowledge economy.   Faced with increasing economic interdependence, exploding information flows, and more porous borders, the Singapore government seeks to internationalise the economy while retaining a sense of belonging and commitment to the country.   In the recently crafted *Singapore 21* vision, the city-state's political leaders plan to foster a close partnership between the state and the citizenry.   The vision acknowledges that "every Singaporean matters" in the new order and calls for "an active citizenship" to build a common future.

The path to this new partnership is not without obstacles.   Historically, the state sector has a hegemonic relationship with the civil society that has prevented the development of vibrant civic organisations that might challenge the state's agenda and actions.   Today, the Singapore government has undertaken the task of reinventing its relationship with civic organisations; from one of control, cooptation, and contestation to one based on partnership.   Analyses and inferences are drawn from three recently concluded case studies in the areas of urban redevelopment (the Chinatown Enhancement Plan), environmental protection (the Lower Pierce Reservoir Golf Course Proposal), and minority rights (the compulsory education issue and Islamic parochial

schools). This paper contends that *social capital* is a key resource in building this new nexus between the state and civil society to realise Singapore's vision.

Social capital is the set of norms, networks, authority structures and boundary conditions that binds a people in a community and makes them accountable to the collective and willing to undertake socially responsible activities. It embodies the trust and norms of reciprocity that facilitate productive public consultation by public managers and participation by the citizenry. In Singapore, social capital is embedded in the authority and legitimacy enjoyed by political institutions. It is also strongly entrenched in the institutionalised norms and networks in traditionally elite-dominated policy processes. Stronger norms and networks of consultation and inclusion and clearer structures for representation would help nurture a more empowered civil society, thereby promoting democratic development.

However, there is also *negative* social capital in Singapore state-civil society relations to hinder these developments. There is mistrust between the state agencies and "non-traditional" civil society actors, non-bridging and exclusive networks of consultation and participation, and vaguely defined norms, authority relations, and boundary conditions between the state and civil society. These tensions characterize the travails of civil society in Singapore. This paper shows that the realization of Singapore's vision of "active citizenship" and "state-society partnership", to a significant extent, depends on how social capital is being created and renewed in Singapore's evolving political landscape.

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.

Niccolo Machiavelli

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1. Travailing Pangs

Singapore is a nation accustomed to change. Within a period of about three and a half decades from its independence in 1965, its economy has been transformed from one based on labour-intensive trades into one based on industrial production and knowledge-intensive services[2]. By early 2001, the worst of the financial and currency crisis seemed to be over. At this juncture, the city-state finds itself bouncing back from two years of economic turmoil in a spectacular fashion. While it has not yet re-gained the momentum for rapid growth that it once enjoyed, there are already promising signs of growth[3]. The People's Action Party (PAP) government has been implementing financial sector reforms and liberalisation of telecommunications, as well as promoting other changes in the business environment to facilitate a quicker and more lasting recovery.

Simultaneously, with the economic changes, Singaporeans are witnessing a slow but definite opening up of the political scene to civic participation and the state's engagement of non-governmental organisations.

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[2] It now has a strong manufacturing industry, with oil refining and the production of petrochemicals, electronics and telecommunications equipment as strong sectors. Singapore's planners now plan to develop it as a regional hub for pharmaceuticals, education, medicine, the life sciences and other "brain services".

[3] Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in his May Day speech to the nation, commented: "After the brief recession in 1998, the Singapore economy bounced back strongly in 1999 with a growth of 5.4%. The rapid recovery was led by the upturn in the global electronics demand as well as the pick-up in the regional economies" (**Singapore Government Press Release**, Ministry of Information and the Arts, May 2, 2000).

In August 1997, the PAP government led by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong promulgated the "Singapore 21" vision to chart the path "for the year 2000 and beyond"[4]. Five ideals constitute the national vision:

1.   Every Singaporean matters.

2.   Strong families: Our foundation and our future.

3.   Opportunities for all.

4.   The Singapore Heartbeat: Feeling passionately about Singapore.

5.   Active citizenship: Making the difference.

Most intriguing is the fifth tenet. It advocates that Singaporeans participate actively in civic life to build the future they want for the country. By volunteering time and getting involved in community associations and civic activities, some of them will inevitably meddle in grassroots politics and seek to influence the formulation or implementation of policy. Others will form organisations and mobilise people and resources to further their interests and objectives, ranging from environmentalism and charity to women's interests and minority rights. Over time, this growth in civil society will socialise citizens for greater activism in local and national politics. Active citizens will organise to articulate their interests and may hold state agencies accountable for their actions.

Singaporeans have been generally passive in participating in governance and public affairs and have the tendency to accept the policy decisions formulated by state actors, even with little public consultation. Historically, the state sector has a hegemonic relationship with civil society that has prevented the development of vibrant civic organisations that might challenge the state's agenda and actions[5]. There are few social action

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[4] This vision was crafted by five subject committees consisting of 83 members in consultation with some 6,000 Singaporeans from all sectors of Singapore society over a period of a year. (http://www.singapore21.org.sg/).

[5] The PAP's grip on power over Singapore is strong. Over the last four general elections, it won between 95.1 percent and 98.8 percent of the parliamentary seats. Over the past

groups and politically-oriented civic organisations in Singapore, despite its well-educated and sophisticated citizenry that is capable of political organisation and mobilisation. This culture will change with active citizenship. With this new ideology about citizenship and participation, the government, in response, would have to cede "political space" to newly revitalised civic actors in public life. Since 1959, when the PAP came into power, it has been one of the most successful regimes in improving its citizens' welfare. But democratic development, according to some observers, has taken a back seat (Mauzy 1997, p.264). It is surprising that a dominant party would voluntarily initiate changes that would force it to share power and give up political space to other civil society actors at a time of political stability and rapid economic growth. So, the question arises: *Why the political liberalisation?*[6]

2. Information Society, New Economy, and "Best Home"

This paper postulates three reasons to motivate this slow but sure political change. They are: (1) embracing the Information Society; (2) preparing for the New Economy; and (3) building the "Best Home" for Singaporeans[7].

First, the PAP-led government is reinventing itself in adapting to changing expectations and demands of the electorate and Singapore society at large. Better education and the Information Revolution have produced a more sophisticated and demanding populace. Singaporeans are now

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decades, the state has intervened in many activities from welfare provision, community-based self-help groups, safeguarding of family values, and even the promotion of sports.

[6] Few countries with one-party dominant political systems are motivated to "liberalise" for greater political participation. Liberalisation often leads to greater contestation that weakens the dominant party's hold on power. Those who have liberalised or who have been forced to do so, like Taiwan's Nationalist Party (KMT) and Indonesia's Golkar Party, have eventually lost political ground.

[7] There are, of course, other reasons for the government's decision to embrace active citizenship. Some intellectuals have argued that involving civic groups and citizens could help the government's recent devolving of activities and responsibilities to the local level. Active citizenship helps policy formulation and implementation by the Town Councils and Community Development Councils, both recent additions to the government structure (see Tay et al., February 17, 2000).

expecting more consultation and information on public matters that affect them. They are also better able to contribute to public policies and projects than previous generations, empowered by higher education and better access to information.

There is a growing awareness among the PAP political leaders that the citizenry as a whole aspires to voice its views on government and influence public policies that affect them directly — both now and in the future. A consultative government is seen to be valued, juxtaposed with the premium traditionally placed on quick and decisive policymaking and decisions. In a recent national survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies and the National University of Singapore, almost nine out of ten respondents agreed with the statement "Every citizen, regardless of level of income and education, should have equal freedom to express their views on government" (Ooi et al., 1999, p 10)[8].

In the same survey, 44% of respondents believed the government made policies without consulting people like themselves (ibid.)[9]. The scholars managing this 1997-98 survey concluded that the younger and better-educated Singaporeans "might prefer that their capacity for political participation be increased in terms of the number of effective channels available for expressing their view to the government on public policy" (Ooi et al., 1999, p.140)[10].

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[8] The largest proportion in agreement with this statement comes from younger respondents (age 24 and below) and the most educated (those with university degrees). A previous study on political participation by Singapore sociologists Tan and Chew in 1990 detected some levels of political alienation, because the people's desire to participate was not matched by their perceived access to or ability to influence public policies and action (see Tan and Chew, 1997).

[9] In this article, the authors also noted that the proportion of the same opinion as that in the earlier survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies in 1993 - 47%.

[10] Some 78% and 87% of respondents respectively agree with the propositions that "Apart from the vote, there should be other channels by which citizens can express their views on government policies" (Ooi et al., 1998, pp. 6-8).

In a 1999 convention on the Singapore 21 (S21) vision, Eddie Teo, Permanent Secretary (Prime Minister's Office) told the public service: "[I]f we are to take S21 seriously, we need to switch from a mindset of telling the public only what it needs to know to one of seeing it in our interest to explain our policies and rules as clearly as possible so that the public can understand and appreciate why government is doing what it does and how that is in the best interest of the country... Government must be more open both in giving information to the public and in accepting advice and suggestions" (November 11, 1999).

Second, a revitalised civil society helps provide a new engine of growth in the New Economy. In the information age, the government plans to tap the expertise and resources of the civic sector for the New Economy. Prime Minister Goh, in his National Day Rally Speech in 1997, explains: "For the future, we cannot depend on just a few people to mastermind the course of Singapore… Things change so swiftly, and the task of governing Singapore has become so complex, that no small team of ministers or civil servants can know it all or react quickly enough to stay ahead".

Civic groups and individuals provide not only ideas and information that would help the political leaders and public sector scan the evolving environment and strategise appropriate responses. These sectors can help public managers and civil servants think out of the box and derive creative and innovative solutions to problems[11]. The engagement of civic and business groups will help Singapore's responsiveness and adaptability to new economic trends. To move with the times, and particularly in facing up to the fact that every home in Singapore will be connected to cable television, advanced telecommunications, and high-speed Internet access, the

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[11] The globalised economy brings new issues from beyond national borders – trade policies and industry protection, environment, labour standards, and human rights. Increasingly, countries have to accept "international standards" on a range of issues ranging from investment and environmental regulation to food safety and intellectual property rights.

government is relaxing its controls and allowing greater participation by other actors from the private sector and people sector (civil society and NGOs).

The New Economy values information, ideas, and inspiration as important resources for creating wealth and building enterprise. Recently, the world witnessed the huge flows of capital and talents towards innovative ventures (most notably high-technology start-ups, including dot.com companies) that have fuelled the growth of the New Economy. Empowering and engaging the civic sector is an important strategy in harnessing the knowledge and expertise of the people.

Third, the Government is promoting active citizenship to build a nation and to get Singaporeans to become committed citizens and full participants in creating the future. Ownership and commitment are key to retaining Singaporeans to continue to work and live in Singapore when they are mobile and outward looking in a globalised economy. In the 21st Century, Singapore is competing with many other countries to retain the best of its people, whose education and sophistication are increasing. The Prime Minister announced as early as 1996: "As Singaporeans become better-off and more internationally mobile, we must strengthen our community bonds so that we stay committed to Singapore… Here, we will realise our hopes and aspirations. Here we will have a bright future, where Singapore becomes our home of choice" (Goh, 1996).

This "home of choice" imperative spurred a series of white propaganda messages by the government to make Singapore the "Best Home for all Singaporeans" by providing new avenues for them to participate in shaping the future. To this end, a nation is to be built on social cohesion, political stability, shared values and aspirations - what is now termed the "heartware" of the people. The new freedom for participation and call for activism, it is hoped, will enhance the passion and commitment to Singapore.

3.   Teething Problems

This new "political opening" has changed the way Singaporeans relate to the state. Both the government and people sectors seem to have some "adaptive work" to do in this new political and civic landscape[12]. To examine some of the issues more closely, the author has co-directed an 18-month study of three cases in three different policy areas where civil society actors are playing an expanding role in collaboration or contestation with the state. More than 40 informants from the state agencies and civil society groups have been interviewed in-depth, documents on the relevant policy issues surveyed and the results of a questionnaire survey on state-civil society relations analysed.   The three policy areas are: (1) urban redevelopment (the Chinatown Enhancement Plan); (2) environmental protection (the Lower Peirce Reservoir Golf Course Proposal); and (3) religious education (the compulsory education issue and *madrasahs* or Islamic parochial schools). The three cases reveal policy areas in which problems have been manifested in the developing state-civil society relations.

In urban redevelopment, the state agencies involved in the reshaping of the local landscape traditionally dominated policy making, and there was strong mistrust between the government and civil society actors. In this policy area, state-civil society relations were characterised by *domination* (by the state). For the second policy area, environmentalist groups during the recent decade have taken on an adversarial approach in engaging public organisations seeking to transform the natural environment. Their relationship was predominantly one of *contestation.* And finally in the area of Muslim

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[12] In his book (1994), Ronald Heifetz's conception of adaptive work signifies the learning required to address conflicts or problems. Leaders help people to clarify vision and goals, set priorities and timing, assess options and trade-offs, resolve "competing values", and take action.   They must undertake the work of solving difficult problems, which entails first identifying and exposing "internal contradictions", weighing competing interests, and then mobilising the people to learn and adapt. In Singapore's context, both the public and civic sectors need leadership that will engage the issues between the two sectors according to their values and purposes in a process he would call "adaptive change".

religious education, Muslim community and professional organisations had in the past accepted the state's agenda and, for some, also its funding. The government's relations with civil society actors are best described as one of co-optation. All three situations are not the ideal-type relationships that the Singapore government is currently advocating and striving to establish, i.e. one of partnership. Nevertheless, the situations in these three policy areas are fast changing as civil society actors come into increasing contact with officials in the new era of "active citizenship". These case studies are specifically chosen to examine the full range of problems and emerging issues between the two sectors[13].

4. The Chinatown Enhancement Plan

On 25 September 1998, Finance Minister Richard Hu unveiled a $65 million plan to revitalise Singapore's Chinatown. Chinatown, a district rich in cultural and architectural heritage, will be given a new lease of life with the comprehensive Chinatown Enhancement Plan. Over a three-year period, the proposed plan intends to transform the neighbourhood into a tourist attraction with street performances, open-air food stalls, and traditional craft stores reminiscent of the Chinatown of old, reviving some extinct cultural activities and traditional crafts.

The Chinatown Enhancement Plan is part of a $353 million (S$600 million) plan to develop eleven "thematic zones" to turn Singapore into a tourism hub[14]. Under the Tourism 21 Plan, eleven zones were identified for development to enhance Singapore's attractiveness as a world-class holiday destination. Under the grand vision, *Tourism 21*, the Singapore Tourism

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[13] The case studies are part of a recently concluded joint research project funded by the Institute of Policy Studies and the National University of Singapore to study the developing state-civil society relationship in Singapore.

[14] Some of the other zones include Little India, the Singapore River, and the Mall of Singapore (spanning Orchard Road and Marina Square).

Board (STB) aims to develop the city-state into the tourist capital in Asia. Chinatown will be one of the key cultural magnets to attract visitors to stay longer and spend more in Singapore[15].

The STB is the lead agency to spearhead the implementation of the Chinatown Enhancement Plan. It called for specialist consultants in historical research, business and market studies, architectural design, landscaping, lighting, transportation and museum design. Over the years, residents moved out and the Urban Redevelopment Authority has acquired the vacated shop houses and refurbished them but it has not been able to attract new tenants. In an interview with the author, STB Chief Executive Yeo Khee Leng commented "Chinatown lacks activity and spirit. We have the hardware, but there are encumbrances such as the heat, lack of packaging and absence of life. We need to recapture the spirit and recreate it in order to bring it alive". Feedback gathered by the STB from tourists showed that the area needs redevelopment[16].

Soon after the unveiling of the Chinatown Enhancement Plan in November 1998, the plan came under strong public criticism led by the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS), a small non-governmental organisation interested in heritage and conservation in Singapore[17]. The Heritage Society,

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[15] From as far back as 1994, the STB has been working to develop a strategic plan to promote tourism in Singapore. Discussions have been held with more than 350 contributors, which included 70 committee members, 12 tourism-related associations, 220 resource persons, and 50 secretariat members on the proposed Chinatown redevelopment (Hussock, 1999, p.2).

[16] Yeo explained: "We start by looking back at its history. What kind of people and business were there. Then we look into the present. What else will attract people there, what's missing? Finally, we consider what [new things] could be done. Which streets could be pedestrianized? How can we introduce activities that are close to what was there before? We decided on a cultural center for performances and a heritage center where people can get an overview of the history of the place. It will be a 'one-stop' information place for tourists. We also planned gardens, street lightings, and furniture so that every part of Chinatown will have a unified yet distinctive style. These are designed to be "thematic" to carry a uniform message." Interview with the author on 8 September 2000.

[17] STB Chief Executive Yeo recalled "When we launched [the Chinatown Plan], the response was very good. Three months later, there was a very long letter to the press expressing opposition to the plan. It was by Tay Kheng Soon, William Lim, [and] Richard Ho – all architects. Another group who saw themselves as "caretakers" of Singapore's heritage, led

led by sociologist Kwok Kian Woon, favoured a minimalist approach, in the belief that Chinatown as a residential and commercial community should be allowed to evolve by itself, while public investments should be restricted to improving physical infrastructure like streets, drainage, and lighting (Hussock, 1999, p 4). The Heritage Society charged that the plan proposes to turn Chinatown into a "theme park", among other transgressions of artificial engineering, imposed boundaries, homogenisation, superficial treatment of history, and insensitivity to the local residential community (Kwok et al., 2000, p.1). It also criticised the STB as taking a "clean slate" approach to urban development, stressing new programmes, structures and identities while excluding long-standing community interests and heritage concerns.

Mr Kenneth Liang, then STB's Director Thematic Development and Creative Consultant recalled "When we approached the Chinatown project, we were not aware of a growing constituency of civic groups interested in its future. They are mainly professionals developing a voice [in public affairs] and who felt they have a right to express themselves"[18]. The STB was consulting stakeholders from residents' committees, trade associations, and grassroots organisations. The Revitalization of Chinatown Committee was formed. Stakeholders were kept abreast of the developing plan. Despite these efforts at consulting what STB considered "legitimate stakeholders" of Chinatown, several individuals who have sentimental ties with the place

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by Kwok Kian Woon, played a conciliatory role in this disagreement. The three felt that for a project of this scale and national importance, the architect fraternity must have the right to be consulted. "They have three accusations. First, we are doing it for the tourists. Second, it is designed like a theme park. And third, the proposals are Orientalist, rather than local. There followed a television interview with architect Richard Ho, and the STB gave a full reply in the newspapers, but the public perception did not change; the people continue to hold the belief that we are trying to make Chinatown into a theme park. Following these disagreements, the STB invited the two groups to come up with their proposals. The proposals presented however did not differ from the initial plans announced. The same criticisms levelled against the initial plans were thus unfounded. (Interview with the author on 8 September 2000).

[18] Interview with author on 8 September 2000.

apparently felt left out in the public consultation and sought to have their voices heard.

Several emotional letters to the press took issue with the plan. The print, Internet, and television media rode the wave of public interest to publicise the plan and highlight the (predominantly negative) public reaction to it. The public outcry caused the STB to respond with replies to letters and articles to the press, as well as a public forum and a closed door meeting with contributors to the Chinese newspapers.

Eventually the plan had to be temporarily shelved to deal with the brewing controversy. A series of meetings, dialogues, and forums were held to expand the consultation and for the STB to solicit views and give public account on the Plan[19]. The STB and SHS held many meetings and eventually established "common ground" on the Chinatown issue. The revised Chinatown Enhancement Plan went on apace, but with the implementing agencies engaging in consultation with a much broader spectrum of interested groups and individual citizens.

5. The Lower Peirce Reservoir Golf Course Proposal

In early 1990, the Public Utilities Board (PUB) of Singapore drew up a "proposal" to develop two 18-hole golf courses on the northern banks of the Lower Peirce Reservoir[20]. The PUB is the authority regulating and managing the reservoirs, rivers, waterways, drainage systems, and water treatment facilities in Singapore. The golf courses would occupy an area of 124 hectares of secondary forest. The PUB was under pressure to make available more reservoirs and catchment areas to meet the recreational golfing needs of the public.

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[19] For instance, a well-attended public forum was held on February 1, 1999 by the STB and the Revitalization of Chinatown Committee (**The Straits Times**, 23 January 1999).

[20] It is a concept plan rather than a formal proposal for planning application and approval, (see Singapore Parliament, 1993, Vol. 60, column 105, para.1).

As the area was within protected central water catchments designated as nature reserves, the National Parks Board (NParks) and its supervising ministry, Ministry of National Development (MND), can approve these projects after seeking clearance from the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the overall co-ordinator for land use in Singapore, and the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI). As in the Chinatown Enhancement Plan, the Lower Peirce Reservoir Golf Course Proposal is another rare instance in which a government project faced strong opposition and was ostensibly stalled by civil society groups and individuals. In this case, the 'protagonist' was the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS)[21].

"From the outset, concerns were raised by MND and NParks about the environmental impact of the golf course on the nature reserves... without their support, it would be inappropriate to take it to the "external stakeholders… which in this case was NSS"[22]. An American design team, the Ronald Fream Design Group, was appointed by the PUB to design the course to follow the natural topography of the site so as to require minimum destruction of existing trees. PUB also records that "MND and MTI subsequently agreed to deferment of the proposal to allow NParks to demarcate the core area of the nature reserves and for PUB to identify the best configuration for the golf courses to minimise the environmental impact". An MND official explained that while MND had expressed its objection already at the first reading of the 'proposal', PUB was nevertheless given the leeway to mount a study of its environmental impact to see if it could strengthen its case for the project.

In early 1991, NParks agreed that PUB engage a consultant to conduct an independent study of the environmental impact of the project based on the terms of reference jointly set by NParks and itself. Later in August 1991, the

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[21] The Nature Society was known as the Malayan Nature Society, Singapore Branch until July 1991 when its members opted for the new name to identify it as a Singapore-based society rather than with the geographic region of peninsular Malaya.

[22] PUB's written statement to Dr. Gillian Koh in response to her written inquiries.

PUB engaged a consultant team comprising a botanist and a zoologist, both recommended by NParks, to conduct the Environmental Impact Study to "determine the ecological/biological impact of developing the proposed golf courses in the central catchment area and whether the golf courses can be constructed without undue adverse environmental impact". Consultations took place internally within the government, among agencies like MND, URA, PUB, and NParks, to discuss the concerns raised by the Nature Society.

The PUB consulted other government agencies in the proposal[23]. But somehow, the Nature Society chanced upon the proposal through the grapevine. The Society was very concerned that the construction of the golf course could adversely affect forests and wildlife and the water quality of the reservoir[24].

The Nature Society comprises people who have varied interests in bird, insect and mammal watching, photography, botanical studies and scuba diving. It has established a reputation for having a depth of expertise in biology, zoology, environmental planning and management through its publications that feature checklists of species of plant, marine, and bird life in Singapore and the region. The Society contributes to the conservation of nature through the preparation of specialist reports on habitats and wildlife, and the formulating of development and management proposals incorporating environmental impact assessment. It listed ten sites in Singapore as five-star ecological sites by their assessment. The forest nature reserve called the

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[23] An earlier concept plan by the Ministry of National Development earmarked several suitable sites for golf courses, but the Lower Peirce area was not one of them.

[24] This nature reserve area is the only remaining forest area in Singapore that can provide habitat for many of species of animals and birds, including hornbills, trogons and broadbills, and many species of barbets, woodpeckers and bulbuls. These facts are claimed in a letter by the Chairman of the Malayan Nature Society (Singapore Branch) to S. Dhanabalan, then-Minister for National Development on the proposed golf courses, dated July 31, 1991.

Central Catchment Area of which the Lower Peirce Reservoir was part, was one of them[25].

Led by its president, Dr. Wee Yeow Chin, the Society began a campaign to dissuade the government from proceeding with the plans to build the golf courses[26]. The Nature Society has traditionally adopted a moderate stance on conservation issues in the past. It has recognised the need to deal with compromises in land use planning in land-scarce Singapore, and typically offers the government recommendations on how to develop land with minimal environmental damage. In the case of the Lower Peirce Reservoir golf course development, NSS sought to persuade the Government to select an alternative site outside the nature reserve: "We are not against building golf courses, but the nature reserves represent the last remaining tract of our natural heritage, which is home to hundreds of plants and animal species" (interview with Gillian Koh, 26 Sept 2000). To underscore its claim, NSS published an environmental impact assessment detailing the flora and fauna that made their home in the catchment area. NSS was informed of the government study but was convinced that it had to invest in its own study as they had understood that the former would not be made open to public scrutiny, nor would they have any input in it.

Dr. Wee Yeow Chin, then-president of the Nature Society of Singapore, wrote several letters to *The Straits Times* Forum Page (the *Straits Times* is Singapore's largest circulation English-language daily newspaper). Another

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[25] This area has been gazetted as a nature reserve, and includes primary forest, as well as secondary forest that is quite advanced in the process of regeneration into a primary forest.

[26] NSS sent its first letter about its concerns in July 1991 to the Minister for National Development, S. Dhanabalan. The latter replied to the Society in January 1992 saying that he had deferred consideration of the golf course until the results of a government-sponsored study on its environmental impact, expected in September 1992, was available. The Minister stated in August 1992 that his Chief Planner was unlikely to approve the plans if the environmental impact study indicated that there would be extensive damage to the nature reserve. He had earlier assured "nature lovers" that his ministry had become more conscious of the need to preserve Singapore's natural heritage and that they should trust that policy makers would take "all factors" especially possible ecological damage into account.

NSS activist, philosophy lecturer Ho Hua Chew also contributed letters to the same paper advocating the NSS' views. In addition, NSS published its independent environmental impact assessment to suggest the extent of the loss of our natural heritage if the plans were to come to fruition. It is titled *Proposed Golf Course at Lower Peirce Reservoir: An Environmental Impact Assessment,* published 1992[27]. On 10 May 1992, *The Straits Times* published an article discussing the Nature Society's and PUB's concurrent studies of the golf course proposal in the catchment area, highlighting that over a three-month period some 30 NSS members would spend their nights and days in the area surveying animals and plants to collate an environmental impact study to dissuade the government from building the golf courses (Nirmala, May 10, 1992). It also reported that NSS had started a petition campaign, collecting signatures from the public to stop the project.

While this controversy brewed, the plan for the golf courses remained intact[28]. The heated debates in the media threatened to set the Nature Society on a collision course with PUB and NParks. This crisis was eventually diffused by the timely intervention of Professor Tommy Koh, a patron of the NSS and also Ambassador-at-Large with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Tommy Koh, a veteran diplomat, began to take a public profile to encourage the public sector and the populace in general to consider the environmental impact of their actions[29]. In the foreword to the NSS' proposed

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[27] This report was given publicity in *The Straits Times*, a major English daily, only later in October, which quoted extensively from Tommy Koh in the Foreword of the report (**The Straits Times**, October 1, 1992).

[28] In speaking about the proposal, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade and Industry, Lee Hsien Loong, later explained the rationale for the PUB plans, saying that golf was part of the amenities of life in Singapore and that "Singaporeans obviously enjoy playing golf. An extra golf course would be something which they would appreciate" (**The Straits Times**, August 2, 1992).

[29] At the time of growing controversy, Singapore was concerned to establish its green credentials in the run up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio Conference) to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio in June 1992. In addition, the preparatory committee for the Conference was chaired by Singaporean, Tommy Koh.

plans for ecological conservation, published as *Master Plan for the Conservation of Nature in Singapore* in 1990, Koh wrote that he hoped the relevant ministries and agencies would give the report serious consideration and that all development projects in the future would require an environmental impact assessment. On the golf course proposal, he wrote: "Singapore has an excellent record of reconciling economic growth with the protection of the environment…The building of a golf course on a nature reserve and protected catchment forest would constitute a violation of an ethic which we have always professed to believe in and practise" (The Nature Society, 1990, p.4). With his long-standing relationship with the parties involved, Tommy Koh, a "trusted broker" in government and civil society circles in Singapore, was able to bridge the gap between NSS, PUB and NParks. On 17 August 1992, the Institute of Policy Studies and the National Council on Environment and Nature organised a forum to discuss the implications of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, in particular a proposal for legislation to require environmental impact studies on public projects in Singapore.

The report of the government-commissioned study was finalised in August 1992. The consultants were of the opinion that it was feasible to construct the golf courses without unduly adverse environmental impact. However, they also commented that the layout of the two courses was incompatible and advocated a redesign of the proposed courses, including forest corridors to facilitate movement of animals and birds and preserving a forest strip to prevent the accumulation of silage during the construction of the course. Eventually, PUB revised its proposal for a 27-hole rather than 36-hole course for URA's approval. But, having considered the findings of both the government-commissioned survey and that of the NSS' study, the URA did not approve the golf course proposal. In view of the decision, PUB did not pursue the proposed golf course at the Lower Peirce Reservoir further.

While on the government's part, officials felt that the normal channels of decision-making would have thrown up the conclusion that the course should not be built, the Nature Society and public had no inkling of the direction of those internal discussions. To this day, the perception is that the project is merely in abeyance till the need arises for it[30].

6.   The Compulsory Education Issue

In his speech before Parliament in October 1999, Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong proposed that education be made compulsory in Singapore. In Singapore society, education is so much valued by parents that there was no need for legislation mandating basic education; practically all children attend at least primary school. The Ministry of Education, which drafted the proposal, was tasked to look into the feasibility of compulsory education for the first four years of primary education. If implemented, all Singaporean children would be required to attend government or government-sponsored primary schools from four to six years. But compulsory education defined as such was not well received by certain segments in the Malay-Muslim community, particularly those supporting alternative education in the private, Islamic religious schools - the *madrasahs.*

The idea for a compulsory education policy surfaced in the early 1990s, when proponents of the policy argued that compulsory education ensures all children receive some minimal level of education[31]. In 1999, some 1500

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[30] PUB's rationale in proposing the golf courses were best summarised by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade and Industry (PUB's supervising Ministry) Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong. In response to queries by the press, he said: "Singaporeans obviously enjoy playing golf. An extra golf course would be something which they would appreciate."
He had called on Singaporeans not to get emotional about protecting the environment and said that a golf course would have to be built on nature reserve land if there was a need. This has been taken in public perception as the final word on the project (**The Straits Times**, "Peirce Course: Let Reason Prevail, says BG Lee", 3 August 1992; see also, Koh (2000, p.162-163)).

[31] The Education Minister at that time, Teo Chee Hean, turned down such proposals. He argued that not only was such a policy difficult to enforce, but a 1.7% primary school dropout rate was still too low to necessitate such a measure.

children or 2-3% of school-going age children were not registered for Primary 1 in national schools each year. Of these 1500, some were enrolled in private or special schools, whilst the rest could not be traced and were presumed to be not schooling.   Despite their small numbers, the government was concerned that this group might not have the literacy and numeracy skills to be employed in the New Economy.   National schooling made compulsory would also help inculcate a national identity and foster national unity through a common educational and socialisation experience[32].

The foremost ranking Malay political leader in Singapore is Abdullah Tarmugi, Minister for Community Development and Minister for Muslim Affairs. Reflecting on the issues facing the Muslim in Singapore at the turn of the century, he commented: "Islam says, you have to pursue knowledge and learning to your grave.   This is a mandate for life-long learning.   The challenges facing the Malay community are many; delinquency, divorce, drugs, and how the community can fit into the economic development of Singapore.   Some leaders in the community felt that we are relatively unprepared for the knowledge economy. Our main problem is education – especially training for the good jobs and high tech professions. Given the [advent of] IT 2000 and the revamp of the education system, many Malay children are at a disadvantage.   There is relative underachievement in education.   Workers too, about 80,000 of them, would have less than

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[32] Hawazi Daipi, a Malay Member of Parliament (MP), and trade union leader recognised the dilemma saying: "Our nation is fast moving towards the knowledge economy. Companies have to reorganise and some people (especially the less skilled ones) will be retrenched. From my work … I have met with displaced workers seeking help to find work. I know that it is not easy for older workers with no certified skills to get alternative jobs. If we lose the opportunity to help younger Malays to get new skills for the future, we would have failed [as Malay community leaders].   A *Madrasah* education prepares the pupils to be religious scholars and teachers, but the question is how many religious leaders do we need. What about those [*Madrasah*] pupils who have to find work in the modern economy?" Interview with the author on 22 August 2000.

secondary education. We need to jump the boundary to move into the technological age"[33].

In December 1999, a 14-member Committee on Compulsory Education was formed to study the feasibility of such a policy in Singapore[34]. As part of the study, the Committee sought views from various segments of society, especially those who would be directly affected by the proposed policy, including the *madrasahs*. Compulsory education, defined as compulsory national schooling, implied that *madrasah*s could no longer offer their primary classes as an alternative to national primary schooling.

The *madrasah*s train Islamic scholars (*ulama*) and instructors (*asatizah*) for the local Muslim community. They operate as full-time schools, offering a mixture of both religious and academic curricula from primary up to post-secondary level[35]. There are six full-time *madrasah*s in Singapore, with a total student population of about 4000, with most of the schools offering both primary and secondary classes. As private schools, *madrasah*s are loosely regulated by the Education Ministry. They do not receive government funding and are funded by the Malay-Muslim community, and hence they have significant autonomy.

The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) was "appointed" by the government to oversee the development and progress of *madrasah* education. In March 1990, MUIS intensified its efforts to improve the *madrasah* education system. However, its efforts in consolidating and upgrading the *madrasah* system had been slow and few, partly due to tacit

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[33] Interview with the author on 21 July 1999.

[34] Chaired by the Senior Minister of State for Education, the Committee consisted of Members of Parliament, school principals, a community leader, and officials from the relevant ministries.

[35] The *madrasah*s were family-run institutions. They were mostly built by Muslim philanthropists and later managed by their families (or trustees of their families) for generations. Each *madrasah* had a management committee, which functioned as the school's main policy-making body. Like other established schools, each *madrasah* had its distinctive tradition and culture, its own management style and an independence that it jealously guarded from one another, and outsiders.

resistance by the *madrasah*s. The *madrasah*s, which had established and managed themselves independently of MUIS for many years, resented having to be answerable to MUIS under the new arrangement.

In the late 1990s, the Education Minister made public some startling statistics about the academic performance of *madrasah* students. The figures showed that Malay-Muslim students in national schools performed far better than their counterparts in *madrasah*s[36]. Subsequently, in his 1999 National Day Rally speech to the nation, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong commented on the high dropout rates amongst *madrasah* students, citing figures from the past three years that some 65% of *madrasah* students dropped out of school each year without completing their secondary education (Goh, 1999). His concern was that these dropouts were neither qualified to be religious instructors nor suitable for other skilled jobs in the developing knowledge-based economy of Singapore[37]. Another concern was related to national integration. *Madrasah* students, who are physically and socially segregated from mainstream pupils, also lacked the opportunity for socialisation in a multi-racial, multi-religious context.

The proposed compulsory education policy drew mixed but intense response from different sections of the Muslim community. Some who long recognised the inadequacies of the *madrasah* system supported the move. This was the position of Malay political leaders and some community

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[36] Comparisons were made in terms of the percentage of students completing secondary education and percentage passes in national exams.

[37] The Prime Minister, in his Rally speech, also told Malay community leaders to undertake a study of the employability of *madrasah* school-leavers. He then advised Muslim parents to make informed decisions when deciding on *madrasah* education for their children. Not long after these issues were brought to the forefront of the national agenda, Prime Minister Goh announced his proposal for a compulsory education policy. He said at the rally: "The issue is the future of a younger generation of Muslim children…Do you want them to grow up all being religious teachers and religious preachers, or do you want them to be trained in IT, to be engineers, doctors, architects, professionals?" (Goh, 1999).

leaders[38]. They shared the Prime Minister's concern over the quality of *madrasah* education as well as the plight of the dropouts and school leavers. They believed, for reasons of economic efficiency, that sending Muslim children to national schools was better than developing the capacities of the six *madrasah*s, to achieve higher standards of teaching at primary level. The *madrasah* community perceived compulsory education as the government's ploy –or deliberate attempt to undermine the Muslim parochial school system[39]. Some *madrasah* teachers and administrators argued that their students' poor academic performance was due to serious limitations in teaching resources, trained teachers, school facilities and funding in general. Their students had limited learning time for academic subjects because they had to focus on religious subjects and the study of Arabic. The *asatizahs* (*madrasah* teachers) claimed that the rigours of the religious subjects required students to start their training from a young age. They disputed claims made by some of the Malay community leaders that students could start religious training at secondary level, upon completing their primary education in national schools[40].

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[38] On the issue of preparing the Malay community for the Knowledge-based Economy (KBE) Othman Haron Eusofe, Malay MP and Minister of State for Manpower commented in an interview with the author on 31 August 2000: "What is KBE is still being debated among the Malay-Muslim community. Some religious leaders still want an Islamic economy. Secular knowledge is seen to be against religious knowledge. They find the KBE too materialistic, with no spirituality… There is a tension here. The *madrasah*s do not emphasize sufficient attention to qualifications for the KBE. The curriculum with strong emphasis on the Arabic studies and Malay language does not prepare them for employment in the KBE. Many Madrasah students drop out or do not continue with religious studies. If these Malays become unemployable, there will be social problems."

[39] The *madrasah* community comprises those directly involved in the actual running of the *madrasah*s such as the *madrasah* administrators (Board of Trustees), principals and teachers. Beyond this inner circle is the larger community of *asatizahs* (most of whom were alumni of *madrasah*s), religious leaders, and *ulama*, and members of Islamic organisations such as PERGAS and PERDAUS.

[40] Some were quick to draw comparison with the closure of Malay vernacular schools in the past, also due to falling enrolment. More critical supporters argued that the proposed policy was probably intended to close down the *madrasah*s, which were then gaining popularity amongst Muslim parents.

Other *madrasah* supporters insisted on their right and freedom to educate their children in a manner they saw fit. They pointed to the lack of accommodation in national schools for Muslim students to don the Islamic garb or to perform prayers, all of which formed part and parcel of *madrasah* education. Some principals and administrators pointed to the very small proportion of Malay students attending *madrasah*s, and asked for some flexibility for them to be exempted from compulsory national schooling.

Faced with this challenge, leaders of the six full-time *madrasah*s formed the Joint-Committee of *Madrasah*s (JCM) to work out a collective response to the Prime Minister's concerns. What surprised many, especially Malay community leaders, was that these very measures were also undertaken by MUIS[41]. This led many to question the apparent duplication of efforts by two related yet separate bodies. In fact, some even questioned why the JCM was formed in the first place, when MUIS was the "designated" agency responsible for *madrasah* matters[42]. Insiders said that JCM was formed out of frustration towards MUIS. The *madrasah*s were not confident that MUIS would truly represent their interests to the government, or "play that leadership role, as they [the *madrasah*s] wanted" on the compulsory education issue.

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[41] On the apparent rift between the two bodies, JCM's chairperson Haji Pasuni Maulan said that they did not want to give the impression that JCM and MUIS were on opposing ends. JCM in fact would like to work together "on par, or at the same level as MUIS" and not as subordinate organisations "receiving directives from the top". However, he conceded the fact that "between MUIS and *madrasah*s, there are some gaps…because MUIS does not have complete information about the situation in *madrasah*s" (interview with Chairman, Joint-Committee of *Madrasah*s, Haji Pasuni Maulan on June 27, 2000).

[42] JCM members justified the formation of the Joint Committee by stating their desire to be more directly involved in this issue. They said that as the issue affected them directly, the *madrasah*s wanted to be more pro-active in determining their future, rather than leaving the matter to "outsiders". Given their knowledge and experience running the *madrasah*s, JCM members opined that they would better know the problems of the *madrasah* system and possibly find the solutions. The JCM projected itself as "another avenue for the Malay-Muslim community to voice their opinions and concerns about *madrasah* education". JCM also claimed that their position and views on the issue would be an "independent" one, and "this is better than having only one view from a particular section of the community (see **Berita Harian**, December 24, 1999).

The *madrasah*s became an issue focussing national attention, discussed in closed-door meetings and open forums, in mosques, in the media - by a whole spectrum of the Malay-Muslim population. Parents, teachers and interested individuals wrote to the press with their views on *madrasah* education. Malay-Muslim organisations also engaged the press in expressing their interests and positions. Academics and educationists wrote in with their proposals on how the *madrasah* system could be improved.

Noteworthy were discussions in the website, *Cyber Ummah*, where some of the strongest and most critical views on the *madrasah* issue were heard. *Cyber Ummah* was a website maintained by the Association of Islamic Teachers and Scholars, PERGAS. At the height of the debate, PERGAS dedicated the site solely to discussing and gathering views and feedback on the *madrasah* issue from the Muslim community. The site became a platform for *madrasah* advocates to draw support; others used it to criticise the government and specifically the Malay PAP political leaders, whom they perceived as ineffective and unwilling to fight for the interests of the Muslim parochial schools.

The heated exchanges in the website, probably taken as a sign of growing support from the Muslim population for the *madrasah*s, encouraged PERGAS to protest against the compulsory education policy if it meant the closure of primary *madrasah*s. A strongly-worded statement in its website declared "We cannot agree to any of the government's justification for 'forced schooling' of all children in national schools only…since to consent to this is tantamount to conceding that *madrasah* primary schooling is not education in its own right". On 1 April 1999, PERGAS released a press statement, stating its position on the proposed compulsory education policy. An excerpt from the statement read:

> *PERGAS rejects the proposal, in its present form, to implement this CE [compulsory education] if it causes the closure of schooling in primary madrasah, which to PERGAS is tantamount to the gradual and inevitable closure of the madrasah, even if not intended... Any future proposal seen as undermining this institution would certainly invite negative reaction* (PERGAS, 1999).

In the same press statement, PERGAS claimed that the Muslim community would perceive the government as initiating "yet another 'sinister' motive of ultimately 'eradicating' the *madrasah* as an Islamic Educational Institute" (ibid.). As an association representing Islamic scholars and teachers, PERGAS warned its members and the Muslim community that they "were not keeping quiet on a matter of such importance to all Muslims in the Republic".

The Malay MPs were shocked by the open protest, an unprecedented move by a local Islamic organisation. Shock turned to concern at how the action would be perceived by the government and other communities, and its impact on their negotiations with the authorities. There were also others who were critical of PERGAS' move, and called for a more rational approach to resolving the issue. *Madrasah* advocates applauded PERGAS' action as a bold move, made necessary by what appeared as inaction on the part of Malay MPs and community leaders, including MUIS.

Exactly one month after PERGAS issued its statement, the Prime Minister announced that *madrasah*s could be exempted from compulsory national schooling on the condition that they prepared their primary school students for a national exam at the end of primary level. The students must meet the minimum passing standard, failing which the particular *madrasah* would not be allowed to offer primary classes. In an exclusive interview with the Malay press, Prime Minister Goh also touched on other related issues

such as a possible cap on *madrasah* enrolment, Islamic dress in national schools and the role of Malay political leaders on the *madrasah* issue. He emphasised that the compulsory education policy was not intended to close down the *madrasah*s, and the government's willingness to support one *madrasah* from primary to secondary level was testimony to its recognition of the importance of the *madrasah* institution.

7.   Mandarins, Masses, and Mnemonic Devices

The three cases epitomise the issues and problems facing the developing government-civil society relations at the turn of the century, which is also a watershed in Singapore's political development. These cases also reveal issues that act as impediments to the healthy growth of the fledgling civil society and its functional partnership with the public sector. The issues hindering the development of a state-civil society partnership are acutely perceived by actors in both sectors.

Permanent Secretary Eddie Teo alerts civil servants that "[p]eople now make requests to their Members of Parliament by first reminding them that the government says 'every Singaporean matters'". Journalists are now becoming quite merciless when they come across a mistake committed by civil servants, because they want to help the government along. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and certain individuals with strong political views are now testing the waters to see how far they can push the "OB markers"[43] to strengthen civil society, and persuade government to step back and loosen control. This, they argue, is what it means to be "active citizens" (November 11, 1999).

In the *Madrasah* case, activists supporting the Muslim schools and public protests by PERGAS necessarily put pressure on, and obviously

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[43] "OB markers" is Singaporean shorthand for "out-of-bounds markers."

caused distress to, public leaders both in the Education Ministry and the Committee for Compulsory Education. In the name of active citizenship, the Singapore Heritage Society has also delayed and almost derailed the Singapore Tourism Board's plan for Chinatown. In the same vein, the Nature Society's very public intervention and behind-the-scenes advocacy presented an alternative front against the Public Utilities Board's plans to build the twin golf courses in the Lower Peirce Reservoir nature preservation area. The movement suffered the equally public castigation from government leaders for its 'emotionalism'.

From the point of view of some members of civil society, the bureaucracy was guilty of "intransigence" in its engagement with the ground (Tay et al., February 17, 2000). Examples include the Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA) plan to demolish the National Library building in the downtown civic district, which provoked public criticism in letters written to the newspapers (see for example, Bedmar, February 10, 2000). A local architect, Tay Kheng Soon, designed and publicly presented an alternative redevelopment plan that would save the building. But this has not elicited a favourable hearing and response from the city planners.

The Public Utilities Board refused to engage in public discussion over its proposed golf courses even though the Nature Society openly stated that it was prepared to advise the government at any time. The PUB chose to engage the government departments (Ministry of National Development and NParks) about the environmental impact of the golf courses on the nature reserves rather than seek the view of experts from the naturalist group. It sought neither to invite their participation nor did it choose to openly inform the public and NSS of the progress of its plans. The MND had strong reservations against it initially and that this was further reinforced with the

finalisation of the government report.[44]   And in the Chinatown Enhancement Plan, the STB only discussed its plans for Chinatown after the calls and criticisms of civil society grew loud (see Tay et al., February 17, 2000).

Institutionally, civil society in Singapore is largely a "work-in-progress". The mobilisation of people and resources in a sustainable organisational arrangement and the building of networks and processes take time[45]. Problems abound. But a start has been made.

The author postulates that the key to the travails in the "birthing" of civil society in Singapore is closely tied to the idea of *social capital*. Social capital refers to the norms and networks created by individuals and communities to regulate their lifestyles and relationships.   It develops out of networks of people associating with one another, forming ties, information channels and reputations in the process. In most Asian societies, cultural norms, social ties and networks are created and sustained by close-knit communities - in Vietnamese *xa* (rural communes), Japanese corporations, *barangays* of the Philippines, and Malaysia's *kampongs*.

Through regular interactions, such social connectedness provides the very foundations for future social partnerships, economic co-operation, and collective political action.   Conflicts and negotiations are often managed through tapping on the social capital reserves accumulated in the community. For instance, in a *kampong* (village) in rural Malaysia, the *penghulu* (chiefs) or *ulama* (religious leaders) may be asked to settle a dispute between two

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[44] While the MND official would choose to view this as a case of 'positive interaction' with civil society since its initial 'instinct' was to turn down the proposal and this was eventually reinforced by the report commissioned by the PUB, the NSS view, the researchers gather, is that it had been a struggle to convince government authorities not to proceed with the proposal. The most one could say of it was that there was a happy coincidence of views at least with the key government department at the time, under Minister S Dhanabalan. This was certainly not made known to the civil society actors involved then.   Such divergent viewpoints serve to further demonstrate the chasms between the state and civil society actors, both in terms of their perceptions of the dynamics of the cross-sectoral interactions, and their conception of the public good involved in a policy issue.

[45] In this respect, it should be noted that the official PS21 Office has also offered its categorical defence against accusations of 'civil service intransigence'. See H.C. Lim, 25 February 2000.

feuding families. This practice taps on social capital resources in the form of a network of mediators to "lend their authority" or "trade their reputation" to the resolution process. These mediators may use local norms to propose "fair" solutions and enforce "just" agreements.

Robert Putnam studied social capital as the ties, networks and norms that are generated when individuals learn to trust one another, make credible commitments, and engage in co-operative endeavours (Putnam, 1993a, p 171)[46]. His extensive research on Italy and the United States found that trust, norms, and networks in a society are the crucial ingredients for producing and sustaining governmental performance as well as economic dynamism and social cohesion in a community. Putnam's subsequent work argues that social capital is a critical ingredient for the growth and sustenance of civil society and democracy (Putnam, 1994, 1995).

In Asia, societies are also endowed with dense social networks and communitarian values. Research on rural development projects in Asia has consistently shown that strong networks of local grassroots associations are as essential to economic enterprise as physical capital and technology (see, for example, Ostrom et al., 1993). East Asian countries are sometimes said to practice a brand of "network capitalism", businesses based on close-knit communities, kinship ties and religious affiliations that foster trust, facilitate transactions, and speed information and adaptation.

In the political realm, social capital is a useful resource promoting responsible involvement and participation in civic groups and local governance structures. Powerful norms and networks generate what

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[46] In his celebrated study of reform of the Italian regional governments beginning in 1970, Putnam found that virtually identical administrative institutions established in different social, economic, political, and cultural contexts yielded very different levels of governmental performance. Some of the new governments were inefficient, lethargic, and corrupt while others turned out to be effective, innovative, and accountable. Putnam concluded that the key to these differential public outcomes was the difference in the social capital resources – "the strong norms of civic engagement" manifested in voter turnout, newspaper readership, membership in choral societies, sports clubs, and literary circles.

Confucius termed as the "reciprocal obligations" that define roles and duties in a polity that are critical for responsible and peaceful family life, civic engagement, and state-citizen relationships.

8. Norm, Networks, and Trust

In Singapore, the dearth of social capital (norms, networks and trust) is the key impediment to healthy government-civil society relations. This paper proposes the creation of three types of social capital (trust and reciprocity, functional boundaries, and new authority relations) as the key strategies for bridging the government-civil society nexus.

First, there is a lack of practical norms for consultation and participation between the public sector and the civil society. Many ministries and public agencies are still "muddling through" the processes of seeking the people's input and feedback in their policy and decision-making. A recent survey by the Institute of Policy Studies cited results that "a majority of the people, 73%, agreed that they would like the government to take more time to listen to citizens, even if [a] quick decision is necessary" (Ooi et al., 1998, pp.12-13).

Recently, a Member of Parliament called for policy makers to be more receptive to the ideas and interests of the people and not view them as "irritants or armchair critics", and be "thick-skinned" enough to engage the citizenry in public debates (The Straits Times, October 13, 2000). Public managers and bureaucrats operate well in a stable and predictable environment guided by rule and regulations. There are few "standard operating procedures" that guide the way to civic participation, consultation, and contestation in their decision and policy processes. There is a common perception among some *madrasah* leaders that education policies crafted by the public managers did not fully take into account their interests or reflect their views. The Prime Minister promised to meet with *madrasah* representatives, mosques, and other Malay-Muslim leaders to explain his

position and hear their views. In the aftermath of the compulsory education controversy, Prime Minister Goh, besides offering concessions to the *madrasah* community, also met with some sixty Malay-Muslim leaders and *madrasah* representatives for a "heart to heart discussion". The dialogue gave the Prime Minister the opportunity to explain the options facing the *madrasah*s under a compulsory education policy and give his assurance that the *madrasah* institution would not be jeopardised by the policy. Such a meeting also served the *madrasah*s in giving them the opportunity to raise their concerns, to provide feedback and discuss issues in an open and constructive manner. More importantly, the meeting helped to build trust in the political leadership and steer the debate to a problem-solving mode – on how best to upgrade the *madrasah* education system in Singapore, not only to fulfil the requirements for exemption from compulsory education but also to remain relevant in Singapore's context.

Second, there is a limited network of contacts between leaders and elites across the public and people sectors. In Singapore's political culture, the social and professional ties between state agencies and businesses have often paved the way for partnerships between organisations. Where there are linkages between key leaders, mutual aid and co-operation tend to percolate down the line to the rest of the organisations. This top-driven web has not bridged the state-civil society divide, primarily because there is little positive experience of mutually beneficial co-operation in the past.

In the case of the Lower Peirce Reservoir Golf Course Proposal, the lack of personal contacts and ties between the state agencies and the environmentalists contributed to the latter's sense of being excluded in the policy decision that would greatly affect their interests (conservation of natural heritage). As the result, the intervention of 'trusted brokers', individuals with strong social capital endowment with both sides of the issue, made the

difference. Tommy Koh, who played a role in interpreting the views, interests and motives of each party to the other, helped to bridge the gap by his counsel.

Trusted brokers are trusted because of their reputation and long-standing relationships with the parties involved. Through regular contacts and interaction, more of such authoritative and mediating actors can be nurtured to bridge the state-civil society chasm. It is also important for such actors to sometimes take the "non-confrontational" route in engaging the other party to discuss differences behind the scenes. Particularly for the fledgling civic groups, these brokers can help make representation and negotiate with bureaucrats without the perils of public protests and posturing.

The third aspect of social capital, which is closely related to the first two, is trust. Trust is built over time, often from repeated interaction and underpinned by reputation of the parties involved. Some civic leaders may lack the credibility and credentials to negotiate with and engage the well-established and very qualified technocrats on substantive policy issues. Conversely, bureaucrats may be wary of engaging intellectuals with very articulate and intense interests in specific policy issues. Indeed, the situation was characterised as "mistrust on both sides" (Tsao, 2000; Chua, 9 April 2000). Several public leaders and intellectuals who spoke at the conference "Civil Society: Harnessing State-Society Synergies" organised by the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore in May 1998 suggested that trust is a major issue between the two sectors (see, for example, Sasitharan, 2000)[47].

As evident from the Chinatown case, trust appears to be in short supply between the Tourism Board and the Heritage Society. A senior government city planner reflected on the public outcry against the Chinatown Plan, "The STB has good intentions – how to make Singapore more attractive

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[47] The author characterised the relationship between the government and the artists in Singapore as one of "courteous, mutual mistrust" (p. 136).

for tourists. We [the responsible government agencies and the civil society groups] could have a more open and free-flowing community, but it turned out to be a hot issue of debate rather than a dialogue. Sincerity is key in this process. Like in our consulting with the SIA [Singapore Institute of Architects], we are able to have productive meetings with them. But we did not include the Singapore Heritage Society because they tend to make comments – idealistic and unfeasible [suggestions], but they may not have a direct stake in the issues… [The STB] only failed to consult the Singapore Heritage Society because they are a small minority. We can always anticipate what they want to say. They tend to take an extreme purist stance" (interview with anonymous informant, 2000).

Kwok Kian Woon, President of the Singapore Heritage Society, also mistrusted STB's sincerity in its public consultation on the Chinatown Plan, "When the government officials consult, they must be prepared to change their positions upon hearing the views of others. I get the sense that they have already made up their minds, and are not open to new ideas". The mistrust on both sides could be seen in the adversarial public debates.

9. Bridges, Boundaries, and Barriers

What would it take for Singapore to nurture a vibrant civil society and develop closer state-society ties? This paper proposes three strategies, all related to creating the right kind of social capital between the public sector and civil society, and more broadly to facilitate greater co-operation between the state and citizens.

These social capital strategies are:

1. *Building Bridges*: Initiating and institutionalising processes for consultation to facilitate joint agenda setting and problem solving.

2. *Breaching Boundaries*: Redefining political boundaries to give citizens and civic groups more space for voicing and decision-making.

3. *Breaking Barriers*: Reforming authority relations between the state and civil society to facilitate representation by civic actors and policy action by state agencies.

10.   Building Bridges

Bridging the gap between the two sectors in a society involves the protracted and painstaking work of creating new norms and initiating new networks between multiple agencies and at various levels of these organisations. One particularly important issue is to review the processes for consultation by public agencies on agenda-setting and policy decisions that would benefit from public input and expert advice[48]. This has been done in some circles, and is becoming increasingly popular, but much work is still needed to institutionalise the participatory norms and routines of consultation in policymaking, agenda setting, and problem solving.

Public consultation is a systematic approach to identifying and understanding different segments of the public, providing them with relevant and timely information, and working with them to resolve their concerns about a proposed program or policy[49]. Effective public consultation improves the

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[48] For instance, the Singapore Civil Defense Force (SCDF) has in recent years been engaging the citizens in its work. The SCDF implemented the Strategic Partnership with the Community Program last year to expand the role of Civil Defense volunteers. Volunteers are now trained to assume the responsibility of co-managing shelters with SCDF personnel. Being residents of the neighborhood, their familiarity with the environment and fellow residents provides useful support to the shelter operation (Ho, June 15, 2001). The Singapore Police Force (SPF) expanded its Neighborhood Watch Zone (NWZ) scheme from 25 NWZs in 1997 to 519 in 2000. This phenomenal growth of NWZs was made possible by the extensive and well-organised consultation and involvement of community grassroots organisations by the Police (Ho, March 13, 2000).

[49] Public consultation is not something new in Singapore. Since the early eighties, the various public agencies have begun to engage the public in obtaining feedback on their plans and proposals. The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), from as early as 1982, has had technical seminars and exhibitions for their concept plans to solicit public comments and ideas. Before promulgating new guidelines, drafts have been circulated to the professional bodies such as the Singapore Institute of Architects. To arrive at the 1991 Concept Plan, the URA began organising focus groups chaired by professionals from the private sector. The Singapore Police Force, too, from 1983 has embarked on the community policing program, in which key community leaders were routinely consulted and kept informed of evolving crime trends and police actions.

quality of public policies and decisions and increases stakeholder approval and support during the implementation process. Whether it involves information exchange, conflict management or consensus building, stakeholders can help provide ideas and solve problems. The process of involving stakeholders generally increases "buy in" and reduces opposition to policies. Hence, public consultation can save time and money, satisfy special interest groups, reduce frustration, resolve controversy and prevent political log jams.

In the case of the Chinatown Enhancement Plan, insufficiency or lack of timely consultation with a broadly defined segment of stakeholders erupted into conflict and crisis, when professional groups and individual citizens generated a public outcry opposing the plan. In this case, the issue in the public's mind was not so much how to stop the plan altogether, but how to have their concerns included in the planning process. A more inclusionary process of formulating and implementing the plan might have addressed some of the concerns and allowed the implementation of the plan to proceed more smoothly.

Another strategy is to expand the networks of exchange between public leaders and civil society activists involved in certain policy areas to facilitate exchange of information and ideas. Until recently, state agencies have been focusing on interactions and co-operation with what is considered as the more mainstream civic actors, which include a number of parastatal grassroots organisations such as the People's Association, Citizens' Consultative Committees, Residents' Committees and Community Clubs. While many scholars have credited PAP's long political dominance to these government-sponsored and state-identified grassroots networks, the Singapore 21 vision of an active citizenry would entail a broader participation and partnership beyond these ancillary organisations and channels (Hill and Lian, 1995; Milne and Mauzy, 1990).

In the Chinatown case, the Singapore Tourism Board had extensive consultations with what it considered to be "legitimate stakeholders" (residents' committees, landlord associations, business groups, tourism-related organisations, etc.) from as far back as 1994. However, it did not anticipate the "other stakeholders" who might have a strong sentimental stake in the place for reasons of heritage preservation or previous residence, and STB did not involve these other stakeholders early to promote ownership of the redevelopment plan and signify sincerity in consultation. One lesson from the Chinatown case was that the range of stakeholders of public projects could be broad and diverse. It is increasingly necessary to cast the net widely to speak to a broad section of the people, not just those bureaucrats consider as "rightful stakeholders".

The expansion of the networks of contacts would constitute an important step in building confidence and trust between the two sectors. For instance, the Civil Service College's leadership and management courses may be opened up to participation by civic leaders to offer another forum for interaction. Tea parties, joint conferences and seminars, and combined sports and recreational activities for the public and people sectors will help bring officials closer to civic leaders. Through these, the two sectors can increase dialogue, put past differences behind them, and work together to solve problems of public interest.

The relationship between the state and civic groups is as complex and varied as the types of civic organisations and public agencies in Singapore. There are variations according to the policy arena, peculiar inter-sectoral dynamics or historical background. It ranges from the most contentious and adversarial state to one of collaborative partnership. A relationship characterised by "contestation", for instance, is manifested at some times between the Public Utilities Board and the Nature Society of Singapore, when the latter advocates and rallies support for alternative plans either to develop

or preserve the wildlife nature reserves and marshlands on the island. Other relationships are characterised by "domination", evident in urban planning, specifically between the Ministry of National Development and conservation groups like the Singapore Heritage Society, until recently. In this arena, civic groups try to influence government policy and urban projects through various channels accessible to them, but they are dealt with at arm's length by the bureaucrats.

Many civic groups experience a relationship characterised by "co-optation" (such as groups on social welfare, religion and women's issues), where they collaborate with the state to further a policy agenda defined largely by the state. Muslim grassroots organisations like *Mendaki* (a Malay-Muslim self-help NGO) and MUIS find themselves drawn in to help the government implement policies to reform the Muslim community's religious education system, skills training, and social welfare schemes.

However, Singapore 21 envisions the state of "co-operation". This state is probably representative of policy areas like arts and culture, epitomised by the dealings between the National Arts Council and various arts groups in the city. For many other policy areas, this collaborative partnership is one that would need to be promoted.

11.   Breaching Boundaries

Since gaining independence, the PAP government in Singapore has played a dominant role in practically every aspect of Singapore society. The state has a dominant role in the economy through its stakes in statutory boards and government-linked companies (GLCs). From the time of the country's independence, the state has played a major role both in Singapore's economy and society, as a regulator, owner of properties and resources, and entrepreneur. Even in the social arena, the interventionist state has been

successful in providing practically every essential service and meeting all social needs of the people.

Local groups and international NGOs have to compete with a dominant state that has been successful in meeting the social needs and economic aspirations of a large segment of the population over the past three decades[50]. Civic leaders decry the fact that the space of political participation is significantly circumscribed. "Our civic groups have consciously restrained themselves from contesting against the state for that space. This is sometimes because they are either fearful of political pressure or because they have agreed with what PAP has preached about political stability as being the key to economic growth, thus believing that that government should have hegemonic power over the country" (Lee, 2000, p 94).

Another issue that has created antipathy between the state and civic leaders is that of "OB markers" - out-of-bound topics that are not subject to public discussion. Issues of racial and religious sensitivities fall into this category, but other issues that might undermine public confidence in our social institutions are less clearly defined[51]. In a recent closed-door debate on the Singapore 21 vision, some citizens made the suggestion to scrap OB

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[50] However, recently with the advent of globalisation, the top leaders are talking about reinventing the decade-old strategy of state-led growth to increase Singapore's competitiveness in the New Economy. They are accelerating the deregulation of major industries like telecommunications and banking and are expediting the sale of public stakes in the government-linked companies (GLCs). However, some observers have noted that economic liberalisation needs to be underpinned by political change. To revitalise Singapore business, there must be some relaxation of political curbs, to create a feeling of entrepreneurial confidence and freedom.

[51] In 1994, Catherine Lim, a popular fiction writer published a political essay critiquing Singapore leaders' governing style, which ended up getting a stern warning from the Government for crossing the "OB markers". Recounting the "Catherine Lim Affair", reporter Cherian George writes: "she observed that Singaporeans had respect and gratitude towards the People's Action Party Government - but felt relatively little affection. The PAP's impressive quantifiable results were achieved through detached, rational decision-making, but at the cost of alienating many people. Although many governments are not liked, the special risk in Singapore is that since people tend to equate the party with the nation, this 'affective divide' could translate into a lack of feeling towards the country by its citizens -- an outcome with serious implications for Singapore's nationhood" (George, **The Straits Times**, September 5, 1999).

markers in public debate, since the laws of the land - on defamation and racial harmony, for example - provided adequate safeguards against public airing of extreme views (George, September 5, 1999).

The above issues impinge on the boundary conditions between the two sectors, an important dimension of social capital. Unclear boundaries demarcating what the government considers as an acceptable "political sphere" for civic groups to operate in discourages civic action. Clear boundaries facilitate effective representation by grassroots organisations and the citizenry. Chan Soo Sen, a PAP politician, explains on behalf of the government "The new situation (for social activism) will be like customs checkpoints setting up green channels to facilitate greater flow of goods and people. We act in good faith. If we feel we have nothing to declare to customs, then choose the green lane and keep walking. If we are stopped, address the customs officials sincerely. If we choose the red channel because we have some doubts, we should not complain about customs officials performing their duties. It is not realistic for all checkpoints to be abolished" (Chan, 2000, p.128). "Checkpoints" exist, and are enforced by the government to permit certain kinds of civic action and public censure. And ambiguous boundaries can have a dampening effect on civic engagement.

The *madrasah* controversy is an important episode for the Malay community in its internal negotiations and its external engagement of the state. It helps the Malay-Muslim community claim its voice and redefine its boundaries with the government on an emotional issue impinging on Malay identity, autonomy, and values. The events galvanised various community groups and leaders to work together to define their interests, confront their problems, and work adaptively to solve them[52]. It forced the community to

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[52] An example is the setting up of the Joint Committee of *Madrasah*s (JCM) to work out a collective response to the Compulsory Education Proposal. The *madrasah*s and their supporters were able to take proactive steps to engage the policymakers, put forward their views, and safeguard their interests. This is a legitimate form of civic activism at work. The

think hard and make choices about its structures and strategies for representation. Effective representation empowers citizens and communities to seek to influence the decisions and policies that affect them. This is an important condition for the empowerment of civil society groups and citizens at large. As a result of the controversy, a Steering Committee, headed by MUIS and comprising representatives from all six *madrasah*s, selected Malay-Muslim organisations and individuals, has been formed to serve as the co-ordinating body for all efforts to improve *madrasah* education, and it would be recognised as the "Malay voice" in making representations to the Committee on Compulsory Education[53].

To encourage the citizens to be more participative in public affairs is not just to harness state-society synergies for economic and social projects. More significantly, redefining the ground rules for access of citizens and civic groups to participation, consultation and contestation will lay the foundation for a significant leap in Singapore's political development. And that is the expansion of the capabilities and opportunities of the people to participate in decisions and policies that shape the future of their country. There is freedom and empowerment in civic engagement and a citizen's ability to influence the decisions and policies that affect his or her future. This new civic culture would be the kind of progress advocated by Amartya Sen in his latest book, *Development as Freedom* (1999), the redefinition of development beyond

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JCM was able to study the impact of compulsory education on *madrasah*s and to chart out the future role of these Islamic religious schools. It also planned to study *madrasah* programs in other countries, and meet other Malay-Muslim organisations, community leaders, mosque officials, and Malay-Muslim parents to gather feedback and build a consensus on this issue. Eventually it produced a report of its findings to the Committee on Compulsory Education to voice its viewpoints and advocate its interests.

[53] Finally, in mid-August 2000, the Education Ministry released a report with recommendations for a compulsory education policy, starting 2003. But prior to its release, the Prime Minister together with the Education Minister Teo Chee Hean and Dr Aline Wong, who headed the Committee on Compulsory Education, met with the *madrasah*s and Malay leaders to explain the implications of the recommendations on *madrasah*s.

economic growth and financial success to include enlarged freedom of the people to lead the lives and create the future they desire.

12.   Breaking Barriers

A third social capital strategy is to reform the authoritative relationship between the state and society.   Like norms, networks and trust, authority structures are a form of social capital that binds a people in a common enterprise.   Authority structures lend legitimacy to leadership and co-ordinating actions that sustain a group in a certain mission or purpose.   But authority structures may separate different strata or sectors of society and prevent inclusionary approaches in public action.   In other words, strong exclusionary in-group affinities or out-group antipathies create barriers to collaboration across groups.   This is a form of non-bridging and dysfunctional social capital.

The PAP government strongly espouses the Confucian ethos that society should be ruled by the "best and brightest," the elite political leaders and public managers that are sometimes termed as the Modern Mandarins (Mauzy, forthcoming).   Influenced by the Confucian ideals of deference to authority, the Mandarins enjoy high status in society and have significant latitude in the exercise of their authority in many aspects of the people's lives. This ethos is also manifested in a high moral tone in the administration but also widespread deference to the strong authority of the government.   This strong authoritative relationship with the citizenry has worked well in the past but is increasingly seen as "top-down", authoritarian, and antithetical to participatory approaches.   As a result, alienation is often spawned by distrustful and authoritarian control by public officials, reflected to varying degrees in the three cases presented.

However, public attitudes are changing.   In the past, public officials were able to sustain authority relations with civil society characterised by

control and co-optation. The government engages the civic groups on its own terms to gather support for the implementation of the policies and agenda it has set. The citizenry, too, has acquiesced to a passive role and adapted to follow the lead of the authorities to show its loyalty[54]. With the advent of profound societal and environmental changes and the Singapore 21 vision, this relationship has to be changed too. It must be transformed into one of collaboration and consultation; one based on respect that comes from mutual accountability.

In the Lower Peirce Reservoir Golf Course controversy, state officials increasingly had to deal with civic groups with expertise in the policy area under their purview. And these groups are now more able and willing to present viewpoints contrary to official position. In the area of environmental protection and conservation, the Nature Society has demonstrated over the years that it is a locus of expertise on local ecology. It is prepared to advise the government but is also willing to challenge state agencies openly if its preferred strategy of engaging the government behind the scenes could not work. It has worked collaboratively with government agencies on conservation programs, like the relocation of coral off Buran Darat and the formulation of the government's Green Plan in 1992. But it will openly criticise the state in the public media and mount petition campaigns on cases such as the Lower Peirce Reservoir Golf Course.

In a democratic society, authority should be a "conferred power" to perform a service, and public authority is conferred upon officials to empower them to serve the public interest. It should be conditional – it is given and can be taken away. The more educated and sophisticated citizenry will learn to question authority and expect empowerment in return for service to public

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[54] The Institute of Policy Studies survey found that 9 in 10 people say that they have not expressed their views to the government on public policy, with a slight majority (54%) citing the reason that "they had no strong views" (Ooi et al., 1998).

officials. The authority of the Modern Mandarins will be less sustainable by social control or social habit – power relationships based on coercion or habitual deference rather than voluntary and conscious conference of power. In this Singapore of the future, the authority of public officials will be conditional on their willingness and ability to consult, include, and involve the people in their decision-making. Toward this end, a new authority relationship between the state and society must be negotiated to meet the aspirations of citizens for a bigger "civic sphere".

13.   Conclusion

This paper argues that social capital is a key resource that would mobilise and bring together the state and the civil society for adaptive change to meet the challenges of the New Economy and Information Society in Singapore. The leaders and activists in both sectors depend on social capital to explore opportunities for networking, information sharing, and joint problem-solving on a wide range of issues. At the micro level, social capital is strongly entrenched in the networks of contacts and personal ties among policy elites and civic leaders - connections that facilitate consultation, inspire confidence, and promote collaboration. In local communities, norms of civic engagement among the citizenry motivate people to volunteer their time for civic activities, to take responsibility for the affairs of the community, and to engage in various forms of political participation.

Extending the analysis of social capital from the individual to the institutional and sectoral levels, social capital can be conceived as the norms and networks created and sustained across organisations to regulate societal affairs and solve national issues. It can be embedded in the networks of state and civic institutions associating freely for mutual benefit, building trust and ties that spawn synergistic exchanges and partnerships. In the light of the Singapore 21 vision, intransigence and insularity on the part of public officials

and their refusal to include the citizenry would erode public trust in the government. Parochialism and passivity on the part of civic and interest groups would also perpetuate mistrust of the public leaders and the citizenry at large.

The nation has come of age for greater civic participation to tackle the diverse tasks in nation building, economic restructuring, and social renewal. Conflicts and problems that proved intractable in the former milieu may now be studied, mediated, and managed through the multipartite groups, capitalising on their mutual trust, understanding and confidence. In this light, Singapore needs to create and preserve social capital between the public and people sectors to mobilise talents, resources, and ideas to make strategic changes in preparation for future challenges. This is difficult adaptive work.

Precious social capital is also embedded in authority structures and boundary conditions that foster public confidence in the institutions of governance, enabling them to lead the country and mobilise adaptive change. In this respect, the public and people sectors must co-create clear boundaries for a political sphere for "active citizenship". The dominant state must also come to terms with a reinvention of the authority relationship with citizens and civic groups. In the future, the public sector's authority will become more conditional on its accountability and actions to accommodate civic participation.

The destiny of the polity depends on what kind of social capital is being generated and manifested, and how its social capital resources are mobilised and developed in this watershed period in Singapore's history. The perils and promise of civil society lie with the kind of social capital that is being created and sustained between the state and the citizenry in Singapore. Both the public leaders and citizens have a steep learning curve in negotiating the changing political landscape. They will have to learn, modifying their

approaches, adopting new attitudes, and embracing the future with courage and perseverance.

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