Free speech—Singapore-style

Carol Divjak
20 June 2000

By August 2000 Singapore is to have a speakers' corner! Is this a chance for Singaporeans to experience free speech? It hardly seems likely, given that the city-state has been ruled for the last 40 years by a single party using police state methods to quash political opposition.

The project is intended to give the impression that democratic rights are being granted, if ever so gradually, by a benign government that has everyone's interests at heart.

The issue provoked a “lively and light hearted” debate in Parliament according to the *Straits Times* of April 26. Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng told the Opposition: “Actually we don't think it's a good idea but if that's what is wanted and if we can manage the risk, we will provide for it. We'll let you try it out.”

The venue will be Hong Lim Park, from 7am to 7pm daily. Speakers must register at the Kreta Ayer Police Post, show ID and bring their own soapbox. No licence will be required under the Public Entertainment Act and, according to Wong Kan Seng, no subject will be taboo—apart from religion and topics that will incite racial hatred. Orators will be bound, however, by the existing internal security and libel laws.

The ruling Peoples Action Party regularly uses the defamation laws to bankrupt those who dare to criticize the government. And the Internal Security Act has been used to detain, without trial, anyone seen as a threat to the government. In some cases offenders have been jailed for years. This has created a climate of fear and submission.

Joshua Jeyaretnam, one of only three opposition MPs, commented: “People get all sorts of false ideas about liberalisation in Singapore. I'm sorry—it's a mirage.” Keeping speakers bound by the existing limits would make the free speech venue a “contradiction in terms”.

The very fact that speakers must register with the police will be sufficient to deter any critical debate, and reinforce the claim that Singaporeans have nothing to complain about.

When asked if speakers will be recorded or videotaped, the Home Affairs Minister said people should not be surprised if curious onlookers, research students or journalists turned up with recorders. Given the history of Singapore most people would rightly suspect that the internal security police will also be keen recorders of the proceedings.

The government controls and manipulates political expression in every sphere. There is no right to strike or protest. Films, TV and pop music are heavily censored. Many books and magazines are banned, and home satellite TV antennae are illegal. The tolerated news media is totally subservient to the government, which issues open threats of recriminations if the official line is not followed.

The establishment of a speakers' corner is a cynical exercise for letting off steam over the increasingly difficult lives of middle class and working class people. Singapore has not gone unscathed in the wake of the Asian economic breakdown. Mass retrenchments and wage cuts have been coupled with an extremely high cost of living. A fiercely competitive education system puts enormous pressures on students and families.

Such a safety valve has been discussed in official circles for more than a year following the arrest of Singapore Democratic Party secretary general Chee Soon Juan, who was jailed twice last year for speaking in public without a permit and then refusing to pay the fine.

In front of crowds of up to 600, his speeches included reading quotes from the Singapore Constitution guaranteeing free speech. His colleague Wong Hong Toy faced fines or jail for assisting Chee by adjusting a microphone and speaker. They were charged under the Public Entertainment Act, which has now been relaxed for the purposes of the Speakers' Corner.

© World Socialist Web Site

Chee's fate provoked considerable unfavourable comment in the Western media, as well as disquiet among business and professional people in Singapore. Like others in the pro-democracy movement throughout the Asian region, Chee is attempting to replace an autocratic government with one less subject to cronyism and more accountable to the demands of international capital.

The Singapore government, sensitive to developments such as the fall of Suharto in neighbouring Indonesia, and aware of seething resentment over the lack of democratic rights, is being forced to make some cosmetic changes—hence Speakers' Corner.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site