

Singapore's quiet lobbyists

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Civil groups tell Goh Chin Lian that making their views heard in Singapore requires working patiently behind closed doors

WHEN non-profit group Unifem Singapore pushed for laws to be passed against child sex tourism, it lobbied extensively for support.

From lawmakers and students to civil servants and the man in the street, the local chapter of the United Nations Development Fund for Women knocked on almost every door in Singapore.

It approached several MPs, including Dr Amy Khor and Ms Indranee Rajah. Both later raised the issue in Parliament.

The issue was also taken to the police, schools, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, the Philippine, Thai and Sri Lankan embassies as well as the press.

At the same time, an online petition was set up and poster ads placed at bus stops.

In April last year, the group held a regional conference here, attracting about 180 people from 14 countries.

A year later, Singapore announced that measures will be introduced against child sex tourism.

The way Unifem went about garnering support is illustrative of how most civil society groups in Singapore work to bring about change. It was relentless, but never rowdy.

It is an approach that differs markedly from how the rich and powerful lobby groups operate in the United States. There, they fund political parties and even set the agenda.

The Singapore way, on the other hand, is quiet advocacy and public consultation, say political watchers.

Professor Kenneth Tan, a political scientist, notes: 'Civil society advocacy usually succeeds when done quietly and behind closed doors between activists and receptive civil servants.'

Former Nominated MP Kanwaljit Soin, who is an ex-president of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), agrees.

She points out: 'Singapore's leadership typically does not want to be seen to be influenced too much by interest groups. It wants a single strand of leadership.

'All you can hope for is that your words have fallen on fertile, soft ground and the changes would be effected. Don't expect to be attributed.'

Advocacy, however, is not the typical route for achieving change here. Public consultation is. And invariably, it is led by the Government.

The process takes various forms: dialogues, feedback sessions, committees and advisory boards as well as ad-hoc select committees made up of MPs who will gather views from the public, particularly on controversial changes.

These views are often sought as the Bill to change an Act is being drafted.

For instance, in 2003, the Health Ministry wanted to expand the Human Organ Transplant Act beyond just kidney donations from accidental deaths.

Public forums and dialogues were held and more than 1,200 people took part in them, including religious leaders, community groups and medical professionals.

Others e-mailed, made phone calls and wrote letters to the ministry and to the media. Their feedback led to, among others, the inclusion of the heart in the proposed list of organs, which, apart from the kidney, included the liver and cornea, for transplants. The new law, whose scope was expanded to include organs from non-accidental deaths, was passed in January 2004.

Involving the public is not confined to just matters of great interest to everyone.

It is also done for Bills on highly technical issues. Examples include the goods and services tax, stamp duties and insurance to compensate bank depositors for the loss of their money. In addition, at least 25 consultation papers are put online every year for people to have their say on amendments to laws, according to figures from Reach, previously known as the Feedback Unit. Though its profile is lower now, the Select Committee is yet another avenue for people to speak up. A Bill that Parliament refers to it is typically of great public interest. The last time a Bill went to a Select Committee was in 2004, on the updating of the rules for managing private condominiums and commercial buildings. It was the only time in the past five years that the committee was consulted.

This compares against more than 30 Bills that went before a Select Committee between 1990 and 1998. They range from the maintenance of religious harmony and the Elected Presidency to nominated MPs and advance medical directives, commonly known as living wills.

The big difference is perhaps because public feedback is now sought earlier, before the final draft of the Bill. Examples include the proposed legislation on human cloning and casino controls.

Civil society groups interviewed appear to have been pleasantly surprised in their dealings with the Government.

Says Nature Society president Geh Min: 'I have found that the Government is not as monolithic as one would think it is. It has to present a united front, but some agencies, like the National Parks Board, have common ground with us and we work with them.

'Our role is more in providing facts that government agencies can act on, and giving them the reasons and arguments.'

Although these groups also lobby MPs, some political watchers say the MPs do less questioning of legislation compared to raising municipal issues faced by their residents. Though Nominated MPs (NMPs) tend to do the reverse, since they are not elected, one of them even went so far as to introduce a new law.

He is law professor Walter Woon, now the Second Solicitor-General at the Attorney-General's Chambers.

Prof Woon was a vice-dean of the law faculty at the National University of Singapore in 1995 when he successfully had Parliament approve a Maintenance of Parents Bill, compelling children to look after their parents.

The same year saw Dr Soin proposing a Bill on family violence. It sought, among other things, to make investigation of such cases compulsory.

Though it was voted out, some of her recommendations were incorporated in the amendments to the Women's Charter Act passed in 1996.

One avenue that fewer activists believe will work in Singapore these days is in educating and mobilising the public to take up a cause, says Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

'People out there do not respond that way, unfortunately. It will take too long and will be way too inefficient. The Government might also be highly suspicious of that.

'But if civil society activists can channel their efforts at 'educating' the Government and have the Government change the policy or make the paradigm shift and signal it to the public, it seems as though the impact would be quicker and greater.'

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NO TRADITION OF DIALOGUE

'We have sent well-researched position papers to various ministers or MPs over the years, but there has not been much interest on their part to dialogue with us about our findings. There is a lack of an established tradition - unlike, for example, in the United States or even Britain - of politicians having dialogues with established non-governmental organisations.

'Changing the minds of Parliamentarians here is incredibly difficult.'MS TAN JOO HYMN, president of the Association of Women for Action and Research