

## *Book Reviews*

*Singapore Civil Society and British Power.* By E. Kay Gillis. Singapore: Talisman, 2005. 259 pp.

Without exception, most students of contemporary Singapore politics and society are awed by the dominance of the governing People's Action Party (PAP) and its tactical use of the state apparatus to enhance its legitimacy and perpetuate its iron-rule of the city-state. At the same time, they are also often puzzled by the seemingly apolitical nature of public policy debates and the apparent lack of activism amongst independent associational/civil groups in an increasingly middle-class society. In order to put together a meaningful answer for that puzzle, one has to re-look history, and ask more questions: Were there non-state activities in relation to the British colonial administration and the newly elected government? What kind of relationships existed between them? How did associational and civil groups relate to one another? Did they have a common strategy to influence policy outcome? How effective were they as interest groups? At what stage in Singapore's history were these associational groups subdued by the all-powerful state? These are relevant and intriguing questions which one must raise in order to understand the ostensibly depoliticized Singapore's contemporary society. Many of the answers can be found dispersed in many well-written and researched articles and essays on Singapore, if one cares to collect and read.

Gillis's book is one of the few that utilized much of existing literature and presented a reasoned and coherent argument for readers conveniently to rethink the development of associational/interest groups in Singapore's history. Her long narrative covered the period

between 1819 to 1963, a period, which she called “the era of British power” (p. 1). The period of Japanese occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945 was also treated (in Chapter 5) to provide continuity to the grand narrative as well as to consider the complexities of social and political factors during this period that impacted on Singapore’s civil society. Her general argument posits that under British authoritarian administration, Singapore civil society was able to grow and become vibrant, even exciting. Interest groups’ influence on public policy was both extensive and to a certain extent effective. A major historical turning point came only in 1963 when the PAP, formed only nine years ago to negotiate the transfer of power from the British colonialists, split into two factions. With the defeat of the Barisan Sosialis led by Lim Chin Siong, the Lee Kuan Yew-controlled government was able to dismantle the societal groups, which supported its rival. The voices of civil society from then on were muted and have since then, taken a distant back seat to a powerful state. Through co-optation, absorption and remaking, civil society groups came largely under the auspices and patronage of the all-dominating PAP.

The author conceptualized the associational groups and non-state organizations as “civil society”, focusing mainly on their political influence between the years 1819 to 1963. As a historian, the author is also obviously concerned about the contemporary global trend toward democracy, which has opened up space for civil society around the world. To her, civil society has to be defined in the political context; and as such, she has avoided the non-political civic groups. In other words, she perceives civil society as a domain parallel to but not separate from the state. This is an acceptable approach as she is much more interested in examining how non-state actors influence state public policy. Her understanding of “civil society”, however, remains very much a construct for her own convenience to cluster the associational groups so as to amalgamate her discussion with a manageable unit. Only in the 1990s, did civil society become a theoretical concept for social scientists and mantra for everyone from officials to activists. As the author admitted, civil society is really an issue “in post-war political discourse” (p. 1). Moreover, civil society is

a changing concept, and to apply it through an extensive period as if it were static is misleading. Certainly, the associational groups under British colonial rule had no concrete idea about civil society, let alone any conscious effort to nurture it, as civil groups in contemporary Singapore are doing.

As the author has fixed her focus on the political activities of associational groups, the last two chapters of the book reads increasingly like a discourse on Singapore's political history. Chapter 6 "The Path to Independence" and Chapter 7 "The Dismantling of Civil Society" described in familiar details the political development in post-war Singapore. One major argument made by the author is that the split within the PAP in 1963 ushered in a period where the thriving civil society was dismantled, "Within four years, until 1963, civil society changed radically in both form and style" (p. 172). The PAP utilized various tactics including co-optation and absorption to obliterate the pro-Barisan Sosialis groups such as university students and labour unions. Later, the community centres, chambers of commerce, and ethnic associations were also assimilated into the state apparatus.

This is a major claim. The outcome of PAP's actions on associational/interest groups can only be meaningfully diagnosed if the book had included a chapter on the events after 1963. This development, however, was not discussed. Did civil society die? Or was it transformed? How did their functions and roles change? Where was its energy channeled? What were the civil groups' perceptions of themselves and their functions in this era of political and social modernization? Unfortunately, the book stops at 1963, and gives the readers no clue as to the development of civil society after Singapore's independence.

The author also misses a huge opportunity to demonstrate the energies of non-state actors in the discussion on the Nanyang University, which she only mentions in passing. The attempt to set up the Nanyang University from 1951 to 1955 represented a unique period of Singapore and Malayan history where the Chinese community (which included clans and association, chamber of commerce, unions, and individuals from every sector of society) was

mobilized to support a cause that was opposed by both the British colonial administration and emerging local political authority. As a mass movement, it was civil society par excellence at work.

The book, however, does have its merits. It is simple to read and accessible to most readers who are interested in Singapore political and societal developments. Its arguments are simple, straightforward and uncomplicated. It uses primary materials from the archives, supplemented by secondary sources. Most importantly, it answers a fascinating question that many students of contemporary Singapore have, viz., what historical factors have impacted on and resulted in the retreat of the civil society in Singapore today? Readers will undoubtedly find this book interesting and worth reading.

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