

**SG50 AND BEYOND:  
PROTECTING THE PUBLIC SPACE  
IN THE NEW ERA OF SINGAPOREAN PLURALISM**

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**Abstract**

Over the last ten years or so we have begun to see public lobbying over moral and cultural issues such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) rights, Sanctity of Life issues including abortion, the death penalty and euthanasia and others like the decision to build integrated resorts or the ban on wearing the hijab in certain uniformed professions.

This increase in confrontations in the public political space has come at a time when the government is perceived to be allowing individuals and civil society groups to play a larger role in our political space and when we are just beginning to learn to cope with the deleterious social effects of the advent of social media.

The confluence of these factors means that Singaporean society is facing a new era of political pluralism without the guidance of pre-established principles and norms for dealing with this value plurality in a civil and productive way.

It was a product of these observations that the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) recently carried out a study involving closed-door focus group discussions and individual interviews with many prominent public advocates on all sides of the LGBT rights and Sanctity of Life issues.

We attempted to identify the specific basic points of contention and the objectionable advocacy tactics that have been used in recent years. More importantly, we attempted to tease out the potential principles and practices of governance that may help maintain the civility of our shared political space so as to be able to apply them to future disagreements.

Some of the points of contention were expected. One of the basic points of contention is the question whether LGBT identities are birth conditions or choices, although the focus of anti-LGBT advocates has now shifted from sexual attraction to sexual behaviour – the latter being undeniably a matter of choice.

Other points of contention include whether the LGBT community actually suffers from status harm as a minority group; whether the protective rights demanded by the LGBT community are special or general; whether religion has any role to play in Singaporean society; whether same sex sexual behaviour is immoral and/or harmful to society at large; whether anti-LGBT advocates as a group face discrimination in society and whether media in Singapore is biased on this issue and which direction that bias is directed.

As for Sanctity of Life issues, it was perhaps also no surprise that each constituent issue revolved around contentions about how we measure the value of a life against other goods like autonomy or public safety, or how we measure

longer lives against better quality lives. Of course, the role of the government and its ability to make final decisions in these issues is contentious as well.

Still, when it comes to opinions on advocacy tactics and strategies there was a consensus against violence and the incitement or threat thereof, as well as using hate speech, dehumanising speech and name-calling. Participants were also against advocacy tactics that target and punish individual opponents in their private and professional lives. Also noteworthy was how many participants were concerned about their opponents having access to schools and providing input to educational curriculum.

Despite the kind of unsavoury language that might be used in online political discussions regarding moral and cultural disagreements, however, the majority of our participants valued the freedom of speech and information made possible by all types of social media too much to attempt to institute further controls. Most preferred to leave these problems to be dealt by communal self-policing, though how effective this self-policing can be going forward is an open question. It was nevertheless suggested that we would do well to teach civic and democratic values in schools so that our youth would learn how to comport themselves civilly in the unmediated realm of social media.

Additionally, the experiences we had in organising the focus group discussions were instructive on how we may be able to minimise the hostility and demonisation that often accompany such moral and cultural cleavages. Beyond

the more obvious principles such as having discussion platforms that are closed-door, neutral as well as sufficiently authoritative to guarantee privacy and security during discussions, we learnt that having face-to-face meetings and the telling of stories help humanise each side to the other, impeding the tendency to demonise opponents and project sinister motivations on them. It would also be useful to invite participants whose identities intersect with the ones who are contending the value cleavage in question. Understanding that identities overlap would make it difficult for either side to see the situation as a battle of “us vs them”.

Another, more general principle we learnt was how important it is to treat new laws and policies as provisional decisions still open to future challenge, because only then can losing sides have hope for the future and remain justifiably committed to the democratic process instead of using force.

After all, in the new era of value pluralism, we cannot put the genie back in the bottle. Unlike the socio-economic issues that continue to dominate much of our local politics, we are seeing more and more disagreement regarding moral and cultural issues for which objective rational consensuses are impossible. In order to negotiate this new politics, we need new democratic tools. These new democratic practises are not perfect, but against a background of irreducible pluralism, they can help reaffirm a unity of purpose where a unity of views is impossible.



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*“What shapes and holds individuals and groups together as ‘citizens’ and ‘peoples’ is not this or that agreement but the free agonistic activities of participation themselves.”*  
James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key*

*“By ‘pluralism’ I mean the end of a substantive idea of the good life, what Claude Lefon calls ‘the dissolution of the markers of certainty’. Such a recognition of pluralism implies a profound transformation in the symbolic ordering of social relations.”*  
Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 A New Era of Cultural and Value Pluralism**

There has been, over the past few years, a growing concern in Singapore about political developments that are increasingly being referred to as “culture wars”. From prominent blogs like *The Online Citizen* (Tan A. , 2014) and *I on Singapore* (IonSG, 2014) to mainstream journalists like Lydia Lim (Lim, 2014) and Tham Yuen-C (Tham, 2014), public commentators have started using that term to describe a new period of public political speech and action over cultural and value cleavages. While of course, such cleavages are not new to multi-ethnic and multi-religious Singaporean society, these public political confrontations are appearing at a time when the government is perceived to be allowing individuals and civil society groups play a larger role in our political space and when we are just beginning to learn to cope with the deleterious social effects of the advent of social media.

The confluence of these factors means that Singaporean society is facing a new era of political freedom without the guidance of pre-established principles and norms for dealing with this value plurality in a civil and productive way.

Again, value plurality is nothing new, but it is the confluence of that and other new factors which produces a new political dynamic which may require at least some changes to our practices of democratic governance. This is in part because the deliberative model of democracy that has hitherto been used to good effect in reconciling plural interests no longer seems to be an adequate resource in dealing with the current value cleavages that most often represent differences in fundamental moral worldviews. Thus, not only is the peace of our public political space at stake, but our collective identity as a democratic people too. One of the central aims of this project is to interrogate the possibility of developing democratic principles and practices that might prove useful in coping with this new era of Singaporean pluralism.

While it is impossible to state the precise moment when Singapore entered this new era of cultural and value pluralism, several prominent issues of contention can be profitably highlighted for an overview of it. One of the most prominent issues is that of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual (LGBT) rights. In October 2007, a petition calling for the repeal of Section 377A of the Singapore Penal Code, which criminalises sex between men, was presented by a Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP). (Lee Y. C., 2008) While debate was heated both in Parliament and in the media (print and online), the Singapore government merely upheld the status quo compromise of preserving 377A under a passive policing policy which does not enforce the law on consensual acts conducted in private.

It was at this juncture that Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong stated in Parliament: “When it comes to issues like the economy, technology, education,

we better stay ahead of the game, watch where people are moving and adapt faster than others, ahead of the curve, leading the pack,” but “(o)n moral values, on issues of moral values, with consequences to the wider society...we will let others take the lead, we will stay one step behind the front line of change; watch how things work out elsewhere before we make any irrevocable moves”. (Lee H. L., Parliamentary Speech on Section 377A (23 October), 2007) While this speech seemed to be meant as a statement in support of the status quo, in effect, it set the stage for both pro- and anti-LGBT right advocates to compete to take the lead in public discourse. To public commentators and issue advocates alike, it was viewed as de facto permission for the expansion of public advocacy on the issue.

Since 2007, there have been several prominent public confrontations between pro- and anti-LGBT rights advocates. In March 2009, a group of women, most of whom were associated with the Anglican Pentecostal Church of Our Saviour, gained control of the leadership positions of AWARE, Singapore’s most prominent women’s rights group. Accused of “steeple-jacking” AWARE, these women were mostly new to the organisation and were viewed as conservatives who disagreed what they perceived as AWARE’s growing sympathy for LGBT issues. An extraordinary general meeting was convened a mere two months later, called for by the liberal old guard of the organisation who stood against the “hostile takeover”. A motion of no confidence was passed and the so-called “steeple-jackers” decided to step down. (Chong, 2011) During their short tenure, the incident sparked public debate in both mainstream and online media

not only on LGBT issues but also on the role of religion in what some Singaporeans take to be the secular public space.

The latter issue was brought to the fore even more strongly in July 2014, when the National Library Board (NLB) caused heated public debate by banning two children's titles in response to email complaints that the books were not "pro-family". (Lee P. , 2014) The removal of these books was supported by an online petition by Facebook group, "Singaporeans United For Family" which collected 26,000 signatures, but an open letter (Ng, 2014) and one online petition (Chow, 2014) calling for the books' reinstatement, on the other hand, collected 4600 and nearly 3000 signatures respectively. (Tan D. W., 2014) Additionally, a reading event was held at the atrium of the National Library building on Victoria Street, to protest against the removal of the books. Titled "Let's Read Together", about 400 people attended it. (The Straits Times, 2014) While the two books were saved from pulping and eventually reinstated, they were moved to the adult section where children's access to them would now be mediated by a responsible adult. The public controversy this saga engendered highlighted some of the very strong beliefs about public morality held by Singaporeans on both sides of the issue.

Nevertheless, perhaps the controversy that caused the most concern for the public and the Singaporean government was the discursive confrontation over the pro-LGBT Pink Dot event on 28 June, 2014. While the Pink Dot movement had been holding its annual event at Hong Lim Park or Singapore's Speakers'

Corner since right after the Aware Saga in 2009, and in support of the LGBT community and the “freedom to love”, things came to a head in 2014 because of the counter-protests planned by religious-minded opponents. First, Touch Family Services, a Christian social services group applied for a parallel event on the same day, albeit at the Padang, which was first called the “Red Dot Family Moment” but then renamed as “#FamFest 2014”. Planners called upon their participants to dress in red to show support for traditional family structures and values. (Tai & Zaccheus., 2014) However, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) rejected the application to hold the event at the Padang, with the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) saying nothing more than that the Padang was unsuitable for such a use. It was reported that the MSF had consequently given the group four alternative sites, only for Touch Family Services to turn them all down as unsuitable for the large turnout they expect. (Tai & Zaccheus., 2014) The rejection of the application however, led Touch Family Service’s founding chairman, Senior Pastor Lawrence Khong to make public denunciations of Pink Dot and what he understood to be their agenda instead. (Chua, 2014) Second, the fact that the Pink Dot event was scheduled on to fall on the same day as the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan that year seemed to have prompted Islamic religious teacher, Ustaz Noor Deros to launch the Wear White movement calling on fellow Muslims to, among other things, wear white clothes on the appointed day in a symbolic protest against the social normalisation of homosexuality. (Au-Yong & Mohamad., 2014) Lawrence Khong and the LoveSingapore network of churches followed suit and urged their flock to do the same. (TODAY, 2014) While no actual public

confrontation took place between the two sides, much of the controversy was sublimated into heated words through the mainstream and social media. The “We are Against Pink Dot in Singapore” (WAAPD) Facebook group has since become a prominent online group discussing pro-family issues.

The three occasions of confrontation described above have provoked public commentators to ask if Singapore faces the spectre of culture wars, largely because LGBT rights is unique in having relatively large numbers of passionate advocates on both sides of the issue. One can argue however that there have been other political cleavages that fall under the rubric of culture war issues like an earlier debate on the licensing of casinos.

In 2005, the Singaporean government decided to move ahead with proposals to build two integrated resorts comprising casinos in a departure from its conservative stance against licensing casinos and in spite of strong opposition from parliamentarians and religious groups in Singapore like the National Council of Churches of Singapore (Lee H. L., Parliamentary Debate on IR Decision: Excerpts from PM’s Round-Up Speech, 2005) and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) (Ghani, 2005). A civil society group called “Families Against the Casino Threat in Singapore”, or FACTS, was formed to oppose the such a move. It distributed bumper stickers that read “Casi-NO” and close to 30,000 people signed its online petition. (The Economist, 2005) Though rare, such citizen activism on cultural and moral issues has increased in recent years.

Another recent culturally contentious issue stemmed from activism around seeking to remove the ban on the donning of the hijab, also called the tudung, in the healthcare sector. Raised at a forum on race issues in September 2013, an online petition calling on the government to reconsider the ban was set up soon after and 12,405 signatures were collected before it was closed. Uncharacteristically, former Mufti Shaikh Syed Isa Semait attracted uncivil reactions from the local Muslim online community when he spoke against the petition, necessitating intervention of the current Mufti, Mohamed Fatris Bakaram who called on the Muslim community to act and speak civilly (TODAY, 2013). The government, however, upheld the current practice of disallowing what it termed “uniformed officers” of the various arms of the government such as the police, the armed forces and also healthcare workers in its hospital system, from wearing or displaying religious symbols.

This was not the first time that government policy on the hijab had been challenged. In January 2002, a similarly heated public debate took place when four primary schoolgirls were suspended for wearing the hijab to school at their parents’ insistence when it was not part of their uniform. (Lee D. , 2013) The 2013 re-eruption of the issue is some evidence of the perennial nature of issues regarding fundamental cultural and moral worldviews. Suppression of antagonistic or confrontational behaviours is not only a short-term solution but increasingly difficult in the era of social media.

## 1.2 A New Democratic Model for a New Era?

That the value cleavages discussed above are being labelled with a pre-existing term - culture wars - suggests that our problems in Singapore are neither new nor unique in the world. Value pluralism is a fact of multicultural and multi-ethnic states and the contemporary eruption of such value conflicts does not mean that these disagreements have arisen ex nihilo. Nevertheless, the fact that no violence has yet to occur does not mean that these value conflicts can easily be contained in the same manner they always have been. The political landscape in Singapore has been evolving and our governing model must continue to adapt to new conditions; to citizens' raised expectations about being heard and responded to.

After the Second World War, the spread of mass democracies throughout the non-Western world raised questions about the ability of post-colonial "non-democratic cultures" to build and stabilise their own democratic systems. The "aggregative" model was often promoted as the answer. In this model, governmental decisions are made, by and large, by aggregating the preferences of the masses through elections. In Singapore's minimalist aggregative approach, the People's Action Party (PAP) government took the election victories where it won total parliamentary dominance as mandates to rule according to its campaign platforms and what its leaders believed was the objective common good. A central result of that was Singapore's successful economic development.



It must be said however that Singapore's new native government was acutely aware of the ethnic and religious divisions in the newly-formed state. While the aggregative model of democratic government was popular around the world at the time, Singaporean leaders went beyond aggregating interests in order to distil the common good. This was an era when ethnic and religious sensitivities were considered potentially explosive as the short experience of merger with Malaya had suggested. The PAP government recognised the need for a strong hand to navigate these issues. Filtering differing communal interests, the political and public service leaders modified the aggregative model into something more locally pragmatic given the antagonistic cultural pluralism that existed.

The top-down model of governance which by its nature was "monological" or discursively unidirectional, promoted stability and order in the face of undeniable antagonistic pluralism that revolved around race and religion in the early years after Independence. This was, arguably, at the expense of active citizen participation beyond the formal grassroots network organised by the statutory board, People's Association. Still, the result was relative harmony and peace despite of the multi-cultural, multiracial and multi-religious pluralism, which in turn made possible the world-leading rates of economic and infrastructural development. Unsurprisingly, politics came to be viewed from an exclusively instrumentalist standpoint. Thus, the era of pragmatic and technocratic rule in Singapore was established.

The 1980's and 90's however, saw the rise of opposition parties and the emergence of civil society groups, as well as a perceived increase in the general unease of citizens at the PAP's top-down governance. As the PAP lost total dominance in Parliament, it also began to recognise the evolving needs of the Singaporean populace. Where once the population was happy enough to be led without much questioning as long as concrete material progress was being made, this started to change once near-developed status was achieved. As the population became better-educated and better-travelled, an increasing part of it became more cosmopolitan and adopted the middle class aspirations of their counterparts in other developed countries. These changes were not limited to socio-cultural needs and wants. They also demanded a bigger say in how the country was governed.

The PAP government subsequently attempted a cautious transition to deliberative democracy. Softening top-down rule, this new deliberative model was "dialogical", in that two-way communication with citizens was initiated. The government focused on establishing democratic consensus through public consultation, albeit within formal institutions. A manifestation of this was the formation of the Feedback Unit in 1985, which allowed ordinary citizens to voice their concerns about government policies. In a similar vein, the Institute of Policy Studies was formed in 1988 to provide, at arm's length from the government, direct research on the material effects of and public opinion on government policy. The objective common good was no longer to be decided solely by the political and public service leadership even if it was based their

own research and off-camera dialogues with the appropriate stakeholders, but by having some amount of formal consultation with citizens and stakeholders in public and semi-public settings.

These developments culminated In 1997, when then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced the establishment of the Singapore 21 Committee and said: “In future, the competitive advantage of nations will lie in their people – how a society is organised to maximise and mobilise the potential of its people, and how it serves the material, spiritual, intellectual, political, social and emotional needs of its citizenry.” (Goh, 1997) The newly-adopted deliberative model sought to raise the level of citizen participation with the view to instilling a sense of ownership and commitment from an increasingly globalised citizenry that could in principle, vote with their feet. Worryingly, a rather infamous 1997 MasterCard survey suggested that that one in five Singaporeans wanted to emigrate.

Still, very little by way of citizen groups deliberating or even interacting directly among themselves was encouraged. Feedback was to go directly to the formal institutions designed to gather it. Public deliberations through national media were constrained by what then PM Goh coined as “out-of-bounds markers” or “OB markers”. Most offerings tended to be directed “vertically” towards the state. This element of control kept a firm lid on the passions of unmediated cultural and value pluralism at time when a well-regulated mainstream media

was still the gatekeeper of public discourse and able to temper political heat resulting from public controversies.

By the turn of the new millennium however, this opening-up of the political space as well as the rise of social media has meant that Singaporeans are now better used to speaking up publicly about their aspirations and beliefs on unmediated alternative online media platforms over which the government has little to no control or oversight. Up to very recently, Singaporeans took their political concerns directly to community leaders and to their political representatives. Most of these discussions would remain behind closed doors and there were few attempts to influence public sentiment directly. In the last ten or so years, however, Singaporeans have begun to get comfortable with expressing themselves not only at Speakers' Corner in Hong Lim Park but on all manner of online platforms as well: from online forums and blogs to Facebook and Twitter and most recently on WhatsApp, WeChat and even Viber. These platforms allow both direct and broad access to political discussions by all.

Online platforms, however, bring new challenges to the maintenance of the quality of the public political space and the social fabric. The anonymity and near-zero marginal costs of communicating on social media encourages irresponsible speech - often invested with more emotion than sense. The ubiquity of social media means that it provides a rallying point around which like-minded individuals with strong views on all sides of the arguments can very

easily and quickly find each other. This helps to at once entrench and polarise views. Social media then, often provides controversial issues with a backdrop of supporting and opposing participants who are full of invective and quick to vilify. Leaders on either side will find it difficult to police what their own supporters say or do.

Thus, today we find ourselves in a new political era of value pluralism, but where the government is reticent to take the lead on contentious moral issues and is probably unable to fully police public speech online. While political pluralism is not new, this confluence of factors is giving Singaporeans a new era of unbridled freedom for which we are not yet well-equipped to deal with. By that we mean there are no pre-existing social norms or rules that we can rely upon as a society to deal with the level of antagonism that this new period of disagreement can possibly give rise to on and offline. Neither is there a long tradition in democratic theory dealing with the problem of value pluralism from which we can apply specific and tested techniques.

### **1.3 Agonistic Pluralism Theory**

One candidate theory is agonistic pluralism. While it is still very much a work in progress, agonistic pluralism is a democratic theory that attempts to give pluralism its due by recognising the irreducibility of differences in values and the ineradicability of the antagonism they engender. As a consequence, agonistic pluralism theory also recognises the impossibility of objective rational

consensus. In these ways, agonistic pluralism theory addresses the shortcomings of the currently established deliberative model.

Agonistic pluralism deals with pluralism by first recognising what political theorist Chantal Mouffe has called “The Paradox of Democracy”. On the one hand, the democratic tradition defends the ideals of popular sovereignty (i.e. majoritarian rule), and equality. On the other hand, many democratic ideals come from the classical liberal tradition which defends the values of individual liberty and human rights. Thus, the democratic ideal attempts to protect majorities and minorities at the same time.

How the deliberative democracy model attempts to reconcile individual and group rights with the idea of popular sovereignty is by setting down neutral procedures which would lead any society to rational consensus. However, it does this by dictating that we put aside our political, philosophical, religious or ethical values and our emotional attachments – the very things that not only give us our individual identities, but which also make us human.

So, while the deliberative democracy model is extremely useful for debates on material issues, it is less effective for issues that represent fundamentally opposing moral views or identities, both of which it takes to be hopelessly subjective conflicts.

Unfortunately, as discussed above, these sorts of issues are increasingly common in Singapore and attempting to relegate value pluralism and its

passions to a non-public domain is increasingly impossible in the age of social media. At best, value pluralism is suppressed only to re-erupt at a later date.

Hence, if we are to take pluralism seriously in the political context, then we have to give up the idea of a true rational consensus and accept the salience of passions in the democratic process especially on the issues of ethics and values that we have referred to. (Mouffe, 2000) The reasons are as follows:

First, as we recognise that the political agreements in these policy areas will not be based on pure rational consensus, we must learn to see these agreements always as *provisional* democratic outcomes. Even the smoothest agreements, with the largest of majorities, will have to remain potentially open to reasonable disagreement and dissent. (Tully, 2008b) The minority view or people who hold it should not feel that they are indefinitely shut out. This gives hope to such minority claimant groups that their participation in democratic governance matters, even if things do not go their way at the time. It discourages groups from being too forceful with their agenda at any given point in time. At the end of the day, as citizens, we have to learn how to bargain, compromise, agree to disagree and when a moral or cultural conflict erupts in the public space again - whenever that may be - be ready to do it all over again. Used to the finality of heavy-handed top-down government, we will have to learn how to live with the ambiguity of what political theorist James Tully calls a "stable irresolution". (Tully, 2008a)

Second, if we are to take our pluralism seriously in the political context, we must also commit ourselves to dealing with different social identities in their whole form. This means accepting that social differences create differentials in relations of power which in turn creates ineradicable antagonisms in politics. Subsequently, coming to terms with the ineradicability of power relations implies relinquishing the ideal of a democratic society as the realisation of perfect harmony. The central question for democratic politics then, is not how to create consensus without exclusion, but how to create unity in the context of diversity.

For both Tully and Mouffe, the answer is in creating a new shared identity for democratic citizenship that is not based on a set of cultural values (e.g. liberalism or conservatism) or ethnic origins (e.g. nationalism) or on a set of procedures (e.g. deliberative democracy). Instead, this new shared identity should be established on values such as “democratic provisionality” covered above. This new democratic identity allows groups to construct their opponents as “adversaries” who have a right to be listened to rather than as “enemies” who must be annihilated. (Mouffe, 2000) Hopefully, this reconstruction of political identity will help transmute antagonism (hostility) into agonism (legitimate contest). All of this does not mean, of course, that antagonism is entirely eradicated. There will always be some potential for hostility, but it does mean that by and large, antagonism is channelled into more reasonable civil contestation.



To reiterate, allegiance to a democratic community will then not be based on a definitive set of substantive cultural or ethical values, since these are issues of contention in themselves, but on the democratic *ethos* that different group identities will always be heard and any claimant group can have hope for future legitimate reversal if things do not go their way today.

## 2. DESIGN OF STUDY

### 2.1 Format and Aims

It is in view of the both the observations of recent political developments in Singapore and the theoretical considerations regarding agonistic pluralism that we felt that the most effective yet practicable way of making headway on this topic was to hold a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) with social activists on policy areas of the value-laden nature referred to earlier. Several general considerations shaped the details of the study.

While a mass survey might bring interesting data concerning the general population's views on these value cleavages and the public political landscape, it would also capture the undifferentiated views of the plurality, or if not, then they would be views of the majority of the population who do not have *invested* opinions on these contentious issues and who do not, in general, take part in the public expressions of support or opposition.

On the obverse side of the argument, in a small place like Singapore, the groups and organisations that take part in public lobbying for or against various causes would have a small enough number of leaders that a series of FGDs would be able to include a very significant part.

Advocates from opposing sides of the issues have hitherto had little personal contact with their "opponents" and the FGD format would provide them the opportunity to interact directly in a neutral and safe setting. While of course these FGDs were not designed nor expected to lead to definitive solutions on

the policy issues at hand per se, they would exemplify how greater democratic legitimacy can be gained in an era of raised value pluralism by going beyond the traditional dialogues with the government or their community representatives and instead, by allowing citizen groups to be heard by other citizen groups.

The circumscribed number of participants in the FGD format would also help avoid the impersonal interactions and cliquish behaviour encouraged by large conventions. FGDs would allow groups to behold their opponents as real human beings rather than talking heads on the television or newspapers or faceless avatars across the electronic battlefield. Such personal interaction is necessary for the reconstruction of enemies into adversaries as discussed above.

The small FGD format would provide a conducive setting for participants to tell stories about their lives. Some discussion questions were designed not only to uncover these narratives but the feelings that accompany what was being described. Genuine, earnest emotions, while standing outside rational argument, helps to humanise the opponent.

Yet another way to help along the reconstruction of enemies into adversaries is to include individuals who straddle the relevant opposing identities. For example, in the case of LGBT issues, the participation of LGBT persons who are also devout Christians or Muslims, we thought, would help other

participants better contextualise one another as members of intersecting communities; to help them realise that no one is wholly defined by just a single identity.

The needs of multilogical discussions directed at the reconstruction of enemies into adversaries also generally require a simple programme with minimal investigator intervention. While the discussions should be guided by salient questions as will be discussed in the specifics below, and any flare-up of hostility should be handled before it escalates, some amount of freedom to speak on less related topics or to disagree passionately has to be given to the participants.

Whatever principles and norms that may be useful to protect the public political space from uncivil behaviour and speech must be developed by the users of that space rather than foisted upon them “from above” by academics. Academics may suggest these, but since what is sought is not an objective rational consensus, the effective adoption of any new democratic ethos must be based on the free agreement of both sides of any culture war conflict or potential one.

Still, the issues that were discussed at the study’s FGDs were contentious issues and it was expected that at least some number of invitees would therefore be unwilling to meet their opponents face-to-face for fear of compromising their personal safety or of being targeted in their professional

lives. Running these FGDs as closed-door sessions in accordance with Chatham House Rules (where the exchange would be recorded on a no-attribution basis) would go some way in assuaging the fears of invitees. Nevertheless, we were prepared to offer “one-sided” discussion sessions or individual interviews as alternatives in response to invitees reluctant to take part in mixed discussion sessions for those reasons.

## **2.2 Discussion Questions**

The questions that we asked during the FGDs and interviews were aimed at four main ends: first, locating the points of contention in the relevant conflicts; second, uncovering advocates’ motivations and other experienced emotions; third, uncovering the types of objectionable advocacy tactics being used in the public space; and fourth, encouraging participants to envision solutions and resolutions. For example, the question, “Are there any advocacy tactics or strategies that you think should be regarded as out of bounds? Why?” was directed not only at identifying tactics generally used by advocates but also asked to provoke them to share and evaluate their personal experiences and emotional reactions while working in their area of endeavour.

For a full list of discussion questions used in the study, kindly refer to Annex A. Where appropriate, ad hoc clarifying questions were asked and contradicting views were highlighted during the discussions to tease out elaborations or help sharpen the responses.

### 2.3 The Subjects

Given the theoretical underpinnings and rationale of this project, the research team agreed on focusing this study first, on the discussion about the LGBT rights issue and second on what we term “Sanctity of Life” issues covering abortion, euthanasia and the death penalty. This was because these were two of the more prominent, longer-running disputes where organised counter-claiming groups and individuals have emerged at the peer-to-peer level and have actively campaigned in the public space. For most of the rest of the issues like gambling and the hijab issue, claimant groups have by and large only had the government to contend with and convince of their cause. No counter-claiming groups have yet to organise their opposition to those issues in the public domain.

In general, with respect to the LGBT issue, the participants we invited were mostly representatives or associates of the main LGBT organisations involved with activism and/or welfare as well as representatives and associates of movements and organisations (whether religiously-inspired or otherwise) that have campaigned online or offline against LGBT rights or related activism. A number of participants on both sides of the issue were private persons who have spoken out in the public domain for or against LGBT rights, through newspapers interviews, forum letters and prominent blogs online. A good number of these were prominent public intellectuals. A small number of them took part in the study in their personal capacity.

With respect to the Sanctity of Life issues, participants were similar in that one represented a largely online group that campaigns against the death penalty, one represented a large non-government organisation that campaigns for the right to choose abortion, one participant had prominently argued in the public space in favour of the death penalty and the last participant represented an organisation that supports women going through unwanted pregnancies.

In total, five FGDs and three individual interviews were held on the topic of LGBT rights and one FGD was held on the Sanctity of Life issues.

Of the five FGDs held on LGBT rights, two involved participants exclusively from one side of the issue. These FGDs were one-sided in accordance with the wishes of the particular participants involved. They were especially concerned about personalised retaliatory tactics that might befall them if they were to speak in a mixed-group setting and we were unable to assuage these concerns for them to do so. While such one-sided discussions are not ideal given our theoretical underpinnings, we made the judgement, based on the salient profile of these participants, that their input would be crucial to our study and proceeded with holding such meetings.

A similar decision applied to the three individual interviews. The three participants were not able to attend our FGDs because of schedule conflicts, but we made the similar judgement that their profile within this topic was too salient for us to do without their input.

In total 47 persons participated in our study. A full list of participants and their affiliations or associations can be found in Annex B.



### **3. FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 Points of Controversy**

While it is true that in the focus groups and interviews, separate questions were asked regarding the nature of the controversies being studied and the motivations of the advocates involved, conceptually, it seems hard to distinguish where one ends and the other begins.

In many instances, it is the controversy that motivates and sometimes it is the (perceived) motivation (of the opposite side) that causes controversy. Nevertheless, this chapter shall attempt to narrate the interconnected answers found in this study in as linear and coherent a manner as practicable.

##### ***3.1.1 Nature and Choice***

With regard to the LGBT rights issue, it is perhaps possible to begin by describing the issue as being based on what one participant described as a conflict between “rival conceptions about what a human person is, what is human nature like, how human nature actually find[s] fulfilment...”. Many of the advocates involved seem to derive their motivating beliefs about choice and consequently about right and wrong or the way we reconceptualise public goods from their stand on the nature of sexual identity.

For many if not all pro-LGBT rights advocates, the demand for rights hinges on the view that sexual identity is a given and is not a choice, and this, for example, underlines their rejection of the word “lifestyle” that has been used to describe

their sexual orientation. “‘Lifestyle’ denotes choice. It says I choose to be gay... I am gay. I am making the best of what was given to me out of life.”

Although not all anti-LGBT rights advocates mean to imply choice by using the “lifestyle” term, it remains true that their objection to LGBT rights boils down to the belief that homosexuality is a choice and not a trait one is born with. While, some anti-LGBT rights advocates might accept that sexual orientation may be a trait established at birth, all anti-LGBT rights advocates believe sexual behaviour is a choice. And since sexual behaviour is considered by them to be a choice, anti-LGBT rights advocates have variously compared homosexual acts with adultery, public nudity, incest, paedophilia and polygamy. Perhaps more poignantly, because most anti-LGBT rights advocates believe that the issue is about choice, they deny that the LGBT community presents a bona fide minority that deserves legal protection in the way that a minority race might. As one of them put it: “As far as homosexuality is concerned, if you want to be a [protected] minority, you have to make the moral case and part of the moral case is whether or not you were born that way.” They deny the LGBT community what they perceive as special rights that are over and above what every person is already given.

### ***3.1.2 Section 377A and Private versus Public Morality***

In more concrete terms however, the public advocacy for LGBT persons has in recent history been focused on the efforts to repeal Section 377A of the Singapore Penal Code, which is the law that prohibits sex between men. As one pro-LGBT rights advocate put it: “I think if the law wasn’t there in the first

place, there doesn't need to be such a massive movement against it. Then it becomes less controversial." Pro-LGBT rights advocates explained that this law makes gay persons fundamentally unequal to other citizens.

At base, pro-LGBT rights advocates believe that the law is unjust because regardless of whether homosexuality is a chosen or born trait, homosexual sex acts involve consenting adults in a private setting. As an analogy, they argue that even though adultery is a choice, the state has no business legislating on the issue and intervening in a private matter. To pro-LGBT rights advocates, this issue goes beyond the debate on whether LGBT identities are conditions of birth or choices as discussed above.

But on a more concrete level, pro-LGBT rights advocates argue that Section 377A stands in the way of equal rights to marry (which brings with it a whole host of subsidiary rights like buying HDB flats), equal protection at work, and equal right to assemble and organise civil society groups. It is also claimed that 377A has the negative effect of discouraging reports of sexual crimes. The victim often fears that reporting such assaults and violence might implicate themselves in the crime of a homosexual sex act.

### ***3.1.3 Discrimination and Marginalisation***

It is unsurprising then, that pro-LGBT rights advocates say that they are motivated by their opposition to what they perceive as injustice, inequality and

oppression, whether they are members of the community who have experienced this themselves or they are allies who see it happening to others. Additionally, one advocate expressed the worry that there will be no one to fight for this cause if the current advocates do not. One pro-LGBT rights advocate summed it up this way - "It's a matter of dignity."

What seems however to be part of the contention in this topic is that many of the anti-LGBT we spoke with were sceptical about the rights claims by the LGBT community. Part of the issue is that some simply have not seen any substantial empirical evidence of discrimination happening in society. Two participants were rather confused by all the talk about rights and found it vague, especially for one who pointed out that the LGBT community consists of different identities with different needs and claims. Nevertheless, a number of anti-LGBT advocates, expressed a commitment to support the LGBT community against undue discrimination at work (if it turns out to be empirically true) and even in the military. Still, this expressed commitment only comes out from the affirmation that LGBT persons should have the same rights as any other citizen and that they do indeed have them from the point of view of persons from this side of the fence. What they object to is the LGBT community wanting special rights as a protected group - something they perceive it to be asking for.

Anti-LGBT rights advocates, however, have their own claims to rights and are motivated to defend them. A good number of them think that their freedom of

religion and freedom of conscience are being threatened by the push for LGBT rights. There are two distinct strands to this argument. First, some anti-LGBT rights advocates believe that the legal normalisation of LGBT rights means that the consequence will be that religious people cannot legally exclude themselves from participating in what they find to be religiously objectionable. The main examples given were the cases in the West where florists and bakers were sued for rejecting business from gay people. One pro-LGBT rights advocate related his understanding that some anti-LGBT religious conservatives are worried that LGBT rights will mean that churches will be forced to perform gay marriages. For religious anti-LGBT rights advocates, these examples would be intolerable impositions on the right to freedom of religious practice.

Second, there is a more widespread complaint about freedom of expression from the anti-LGBT participants against secularists who want to ban religious sentiment and beliefs from entering discussions in the public square. Two participants argued that religious beliefs are part of the makeup of a person and/or his or her rationality and this gives them the right to express opinion based on religious beliefs in the public square. LGBT rights are imposed at the cost of the freedom of others to express their religious beliefs and live according to them.

So, it is interesting to note here that a large part of the controversy in the LGBT rights issue, at least in the current Singaporean context, is that both sides of

the fence as it were, claim some level of marginalisation or oppression. The pro-LGBT side says it is not only motivated by a sense of inequality but from a refusal to be oppressed any further. One pro-LGBT rights advocate compared the community's struggles to the suffragette movement or the Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. He added, "It is a most normal reaction of human beings to speak out when you are oppressed." Another pro-LGBT rights advocate said, "(a)nd I think the fact that people find it difficult to come out in the workplace, to come out in society in general, already is a very strong sign of the kinds of discrimination that could happen as a result of them coming out." A third pro-LGBT rights advocate shared the example of a sixteen year old boy who was bullied by his peers but whose school counsellor was unable to address his homosexuality as the cause of his stigmatisation because of the worry about being seen to condone criminal activity. Pro-LGBT rights advocates are not only fighting for what they perceive as equality, but more critically, against what they experience as marginalisation and oppression.

Yet, the anti-LGBT side of the fence also complains of marginalisation and oppression. A number of anti-LGBT rights advocates complained about labelling and hate speech coming from the pro-LGBT side. One advocate argued against the labels - "traditionalist" and "conservative", because not all anti-LGBT rights advocates are consistently conservative across all social issues. Another resented anti-LGBT opposition being painted as hate speech. In general, there is the perception by the anti-LGBT side that the pro-LGBT

rights advocates are rabidly aggressive and intolerant in their campaign and this causes an unjust chilling effect on the expression of the anti-LGBT camp.

Perhaps as an expected consequence, this led to a couple of participants to compare pro-LGBT rights advocates (in general) to fascists. A few religiously-minded anti-LGBT rights advocates also accused the pro-LGBT movement of being like a secular religion in its imposition of values on others and its intransigence. Comparatively, one anti-LGBT rights advocate offered his own hypothetical sixteen year old boy who is marginalised and bullied by his peers for daring to speak against LGBT activism from a religious standpoint.

This claim and counterclaim to marginalisation extends to the world of mass media. On the side of the pro-LGBT rights advocates, the claim was made at the FGDs that one of the effects of 377A is a local media policy against showing LGBT people and relationships in a positive light if at all. This claim seems to cover everything from local newspapers and television programs to censorship of locally-staged plays and local films. Interestingly enough, the anti-LGBT rights advocates made the claim at the FGDs that media is biased against them and for the LGBT community. They cite local newspaper coverage as being singularly biased in favour of the LGBT community.

#### ***3.1.4 The Nation and the Public Good***

Nevertheless, despite the religious affiliation of many anti-LGBT rights advocates and their insistence that religious views can be legitimately

expressed in the public square, the majority also see themselves as generally concerned with the objective public good in Singapore as patriotic citizens. As one anti-LGBT rights advocate put it: “Why did I do it? Because I am a patriot. Because I actually think it affects the long-term good of Singapore. Patriots often do things that make no monetary or emotional sense. And we often do it, not expecting anything.”

One specific example of this general concern is about how the patterns of LGBT sexual behaviour affects public health. A small number of anti-LGBT participants argued that it is a publicly relevant fact that LGBT sexual behaviour is unhealthy and increases the risk of sexually-transmitted diseases.

A more widespread concern among anti-LGBT rights advocates however seems to be the negative impact of LGBT rights advocacy on the traditional definition and form of the family unit and the consequent breakdown of the social goods that come from basing society on traditional family forms. For one participant, family forms are to be respected and what happens within them are private matters. One cannot, for example, interfere with how a family chooses to deal with one of its members being an LGBT person. Another participant echoed this by pointing out that homosexuality is traditionally considered a disgrace to a Chinese family. The same participant also argued that traditional heterosexual marriage is the proven way of bringing up good citizens and that there is no reason to change the formula for successful nation-building. A third participant added that traditional family forms based on a heterosexual union



and values are the same across religions. Yet, another participant was concerned that the normalisation of gay marriage would mean even lower national fertility rates.

The main focus of these pro-family advocates, however, seems to be on the welfare of children. For a good number of anti-LGBT rights advocates, they are against LGBT families because every child needs to be and has the right to be raised by a mother and a father in order to have the chance of a good upbringing. However, even as it is, anti-LGBT worry that just the campaign for LGBT rights and their normalisation would negatively affect the moral values of children in general – this might mean that the wrong values find their way into schools and universities and corrupt the young.

This sense of patriotism and doing what is good for the country is further enhanced by the idea that Singapore must stave off moral decay. Some participants fear what they see as the moral decadence of the West being transported here through the pro-LGBT foreign and trade policy of the United States, and the financial and moral support that large corporations based in Singapore such as Google give to the LGBT lobby. More generally, a few of the anti-LGBT rights advocates expressed a need to fight against the generally individualised and relativised moral culture of contemporary times.

To sum up: the pro-LGBT rights advocates have spoken up in the public square because of what they experience as intolerable conditions of life. “[T]hey are

outspoken because they are reacting to the oppression,” and that voice has grown louder as a critical mass of supporters and allies have built up over time . A new generation of LGBT individuals feels less afraid to be open about the issue.

As this pro-LGBT voice started to get louder, more conservative and more often religiously-minded fellow citizens felt it necessary to oppose it even if they did not feel comfortable entering the political realm. Despite some pre-existing level of objection to general discrimination against the LGBT community and some level of tolerance of the private lives of LGBT individuals, some anti-LGBT rights advocates feel that they have to react against moves to normalise what they see as immoral sexual behaviour. Their reaction is especially galvanised by what they see as an illegitimate attempt to seal normalisation of LGBT sexual behaviour by using the power of the state.

As for the Sanctity of Life issues, the controversy was nicely summed up by one participant who said, “Are there differing values on different kinds of people, like how do we determine who is more valuable or who is worthy of more attention or value? I think that often creates a lot of controversy because different people will see it differently from their experiences and their belief systems as well.”

So, for example, one anti-death penalty advocate was very explicit about how the issue is controversial because it is a deeply ethical issue. He said he

believed that at base, the controversy arises from the situation where those who believe that taking a life never serves justice therefore find the death penalty intolerable and want the policy to stop immediately. However, the immediacy of this call for abolition runs up against many long-term considerations. So, while those who support the death penalty seem to look out for what they view as long-term benefits, those who want the death penalty to end are moved by the immediate plight of people dying and the loved ones they leave behind. To him personally, it is about the obligation to help when one's privileged position enables one to do so.

Still, because this is a deeply ethical issue, one pro-death penalty advocate also argued his case from the viewpoint of what is for the good of society. From his personal experience working with prisoners, he attested to the fact that it is only the death penalty that effectively deters even the most hardcore criminals from going beyond the pale in what they did. He shared that it also deters foreigners from poorer countries from committing lucrative crimes in Singapore. We can infer that this participant believes that the death penalty is valuable in keeping Singapore safe.

Nevertheless, the intractability of the issue goes beyond the basic point of the value of human life. This is because much can be argued about the practicalities of the justice system's mechanisms. For one anti-death penalty advocate, not only will there always be some people undeterred by the death penalty or think they can get away with committing crimes, but the procedures

of the justice system are innately fallible and death sentences cannot be corrected. One pro-death penalty advocate however expressed his very strong belief in the integrity and judgment of officeholders in the criminal system to do their job without fear or favour.

As for the issue of abortion, one pro-life advocate expressed a strong belief in the right of personal choice, the inherently private nature of decisions having to do with one's family, and keeping the state out of this private sphere. This participant compared state intervention in the abortion issue to other policies that seemed unjust or unwise such as the sterilisation of disabled persons and abstinence-only sex education. This participant believed that religiously-inclined people should not impose their beliefs about abortion on others within a secular state, but that most vocal pro-life public advocates were motivated by their personal experiences or were living out their innate desire to be able to lead others. The participant said, "people who are intimately involved in the issue, who are tangibly and really affected by it, they are actually going to be most motivated. But having said that ... there are always leaders and followers, there's a shepherd and the sheep. And for people who are shepherds or leaders, I mean you just want to push an issue, you just want to lead."

One pro-life advocate however, warned that government policy, even under the rubric of a secular society, carried moral signals to the people whether intended or not. In the participant's experience, the legality of abortion in Singapore had influenced a generation of Singaporean women to be more permissive about

abortion. As such, the government could not take a neutral position on the matter. This participant also submitted that the rather lackadaisical practice by doctors and the hurried attitude of pregnant women wanting abortions suggested that informed consent was often not fulfilled. “[I]t’s dangerous because if you just talk about medical ethics, just talk about that, [before] any treatment, a doctor is beholden to provide as much information as is necessary and ethically correct. But there seems to be a double standard when it comes to abortion, where that kind of information doesn’t seem to be almost expected.” We surmise then, that for this participant, the motivation is making sure that women with unwanted pregnancies would be able to make independent and informed decisions about their pregnancies – something that is currently lacking based on what the participant said.

The project was unable to find participants who are directly and deeply knowledgeable about euthanasia. It was therefore not surprising that participants were far less certain about their opinions and positions on this matter. One participant spoke sympathetically about relieving the suffering of a patient and his or her family, but was not utterly certain that quality of life should always trump quantity. Another participant however had strong inhibitions against making a decision to terminate life - “[W]hen you are playing God and you introduce a foreign object to intentionally speed up the end of life, then that’s where I personally would have strong views ... that’s no different to me than jumping off a block of flats. Then, where do we draw the line?” A third participant, however, offered the perspective that this issue was controversial

because the decision of when a patient's life should end is allegedly often assumed by the physician without consultation with the patient or his or her family and also that often, the elderly take it into their own hands and commit suicide by non-medical means. This raises the controversial issue of who has the right to make these kinds of decisions.

### **3.2 The Roles of the Public and the State**

As we have noted in the first chapter, there has been a significant increase in civil society groups and movements trying to change public sentiment with public events and education campaigns offline and online. Nevertheless, the Singapore government remains strong in its power to change major policy and influence public opinion over the medium to long term. It is worth asking not only how various groups perceive public opinion on their issue, but to see whether it affects their advocacy strategy.

When it comes to perceptions of public sentiment on the LGBT rights issue, there is a somewhat surprising agreement on the issue. While not quite a consensus, a plurality of participants, whether they are pro- or anti-LGBT rights, believe that the majority of Singaporeans still do not approve of LGBT rights and prefer the legal status quo. One pro-LGBT rights advocate said that, "there's a tendency to accept the status quo as normative and not invest any effort in trying to rethink it." In fact, a number of anti-LGBT rights advocates believed they were representing the views of the majority of Singaporeans which was publicly silent about its objections to LGBT activism. Another pro-

LGBT rights advocate added that a silent anti-LGBT rights majority existed in the local Malay community. Yet, another pro-LGBT rights advocate argued that despite the impression that Pink Dot events have a lot of support, many of the participants are not themselves LGBT individuals. Many LGBT individuals are afraid to show up at these events precisely because public sentiment is still generally negative on LGBT activism and social stigmatism of LGBT persons still exists.

Nevertheless, a similar plurality of participants, whether pro- or anti-LGBT rights, also believed that while the majority of Singaporeans is conservative at the moment, public opinion has been changing and will continue to change in favour of the LGBT community. In fact, one pro-LGBT rights advocate conveyed his confidence of this when he said, “I think it will change, it will come. The question is when.” One pro-LGBT rights advocate argued that while LGBT rights are still not completely acceptable, it is relatively easier for LGBT persons to “come out” to their friends and loved ones today than it was a generation ago, and this shows that public sentiment has indeed shifted in favour of LGBT rights. Nevertheless, the participant pointed out that some amount of support must be considered publicly suppressed because of the official censorship of positive LGBT images and stories - “whatever public sentiment you do have is public sentiment that is definitely nourished on the very limited and selective feed of what stories can be told, what experiences can be heard, which people are allowed to count in our society.”

Again, participants on both sides of the issue seemed to agree that in general, young people are becoming more accepting of the LGBT community, stronger in their push for fair treatment and accepting of all who seem marginalised. Anti-LGBT rights advocates argued that this trend is to be blamed on the media and foreign influence - as brought up in the last section. A few anti-LGBT rights advocates also attributed this trend to the (possibly too sentimental) support for the underdog in public conflicts. This was how one participant explained it: “they need our sympathy, our empathy, not because they are right, but we must actually give them some, you know, grounds, some space to breathe.” Still, one prominent pro-LGBT rights advocate argued that Singaporeans have become more accepting of the LGBT community because there is more information about the community that can be found on the web and on social media. In this participant’s mind, rising acceptance is simply an issue of knowledge, not even of influence.

That same pro-LGBT rights advocate argued that although the majority may express moral opposition to the LGBT community and its sexual behaviour, this did not automatically mean that the majority would definitely stand in the way of decriminalising gay sex. This line of argument was also supported by another pro-LGBT rights advocate who said that Singaporeans might not actually support the criminalisation of gay sex under Section 377A if confronted with the question. In other words, general theoretical beliefs do not always result in a corresponding practical desire to impose that belief on others. In that sense, another pro-LGBT expressed scepticism as to whether the community of



religious persons are genuinely against LGBT rights as represented by a handful of vocal advocates. One anti-LGBT rights advocate warned that each side's vocal advocates might not represent the strength of sentiment on their side.

Of course, there was a small group of participants, made up of both pro- and anti-LGBT rights advocates, who did not believe that most Singaporeans had any genuine reason to back up their measurably conservative views. One pro-LGBT rights advocate thought Singaporeans supported the status quo because they are risk-averse and want to avoid rocking the boat. One anti-LGBT rights advocate thought the majority in the middle simply follow where the government let the matter rest. Another pro-LGBT rights advocate argued that most Singaporeans seem to support the status quo because they are simply ignorant about there being a real problem with it. Yet, another pro-LGBT rights advocate argued that it was precisely because the majority in the middle has no actual and strong views about the matter that there was a culture war for hearts and minds.

The view that public opinion has been and continues to shift in favour of LGBT rights seems to have an effect on participants' views on whether it will be more effective to lobby the public or the government to their cause. Traditionally, one might expect the plurality if not the majority of participants to think that lobbying Singapore's strong government should be the more effective way to affect policy change. After all, as three anti-LGBT rights advocates argued, it is the

government that legislates and sets national policy. But this statist view was not in fact very popular with the rest of the participants.

Though this question was not directly answered by most participants, a larger group than the above said that one must lobby the government and people at the same time. One prominent pro-LGBT said, "I don't think it's an either or kind of question. I think both should be occurring at the same time." This group of participants recognised that at the end of the day, it is true that the government needs information to make policies. However, both camps believed that the people need to be educated in order to be receptive to their point of view.

The third and largest group of participants who engaged directly with the question were similarly mixed, comprising advocates from both sides of the issue, but said that lobbying the public must be the main priority to effect change. Perhaps the largest subset of this group simply observed as we did in Chapter 1, that the government seems to have retreated from leading on issues like this and would prefer to follow public sentiment and thus thought that the best way to move the government is to shift public opinion firmly to their side. Rather ironically, advocates from both sides expressed disappointment that the government is not showing moral leadership in this issue. One pro-LGBT rights advocate put it this way: "You never lobby cowards. The reality is that this is a bunch of cowards."

There was also an interesting juxtaposition of other viewpoints about why lobbying the public is more important. One pro-LGBT rights advocate said his

group lobbied the public largely because it did not have access to government leaders. Up to now, they have failed to engage in discussion any of the prominent government leaders they have approached. On the other hand, some anti-LGBT rights advocates believed they were forced to lobby the public to counter the pro-LGBT groups that were doing it.

One alternative take on the question of lobbying came from an anti-LGBT rights advocate who argued that lobbying the government or the people on a moral issue is divisive and so the effective way to effecting change is probably through legal means.

When it comes to Sanctity of Life issues, our participants had very different perspectives on public sentiment on each issue. For the death penalty issue, neither the pro- or anti- side of issue believed that the public holds strong views on it. One pro-death penalty advocate opined that most people do not actually care about the death penalty as it does not touch their lives directly; that it is not a bread and butter issue and therefore is treated theoretically by the public. The participant added that it meant public sentiment is unstable - "... my view in terms of how the normal Singaporean will react is that they can be swayed, one hand, on the other hand, depending on who is actually more eloquent." One anti-death penalty advocate agreed with the basic notion that public sentiment is difficult to gauge. Part of it depends on the specificity of the question asked, and part of it depends on how knowledgeable the public is about relevant details, such as how many people are executed in a year.

As for the abortion issue, a pro-choice advocate seemed to indicate that opposition to the legality of abortion stemmed mostly from “fundamentalist Christians” who were the only group seeking to change the law. A pro-life advocate on the other hand pointed to generational difference in public sentiment. The generation whose child-bearing years spanned the time of the “Stop at Two” anti-natalist policy seemed to be less hesitant about abortion than the younger generation. This participant believed that the legality of abortion had a large effect on public sentiment, with many women, especially older ones, thinking it is acceptable since it is legal.

However, when it comes to the question of whether lobbying the government or the people is more effective, there was a higher level of agreement. The majority of our participants agreed that lobbying both is necessary. The dissenting voice, however, was less concerned with effectiveness than with the consequences of shifting public opinion towards an immoral direction and was ambivalent about public advocacy in general.

### **3.3 Antagonism and the Prospects of Limiting It**

It can be seen in Section 3.1 that the participants had a lot to say about why the issues under study are so controversial and why they felt motivated to act and speak for their side of the issues. The heat and controversy of their advocacy meant it was not surprising that they were more forthcoming about rewarding experiences than their most challenging experiences when they were asked about their efforts.

It is perhaps also not surprising that when it came to ideas about how this conflictual heat could be reduced, our participants were not optimistic and had relatively less to contribute to the conversations. Perhaps the most common of the challenging experiences the advocates on either side of the LGBT rights issue had were about being attacked personally by others through name-calling. One anti-LGBT rights advocate succinctly described it, “(t)hey lack manners. Society slowly throwing manners asides [sic].” Two participants also rated the experience of being misunderstood on their positions on the issue as being the most challenging. In the heat of this conflict, sometimes more nuanced positions were misconstrued and caused backlash from either side.

Participants also found it common to face practical obstacles to their advocacy, be they institutional barriers in the civic, academic or media space that stemmed from government policy, or the reluctance of issue constituents to be mobilised to the cause. The challenge in advocacy can also be more personal in nature, like when they find it difficult to convince those who do not agree with them, like parents of LGBT persons struggling to accept their children or young people they are trying to persuade to move away from the influence of Western liberalism.

On the opposite end, it would seem predictable that some of the most rewarding experiences were about overcoming the challenges listed above. The most rewarding experiences were where advocates felt they had been understood by others; where they were able to influence others to their way of thinking; and where they were successful in overcoming institutional barriers. Also, whether

they are helping LGBT persons to empower themselves or to cope with and resist their same-sex attraction, advocates from both sides said it was rewarding to be able help these people. They felt rewarded when they were thanked for their advocacy efforts. One anti-LGBT rights advocate said, “(T)he rewarding part is the number of people who thanked me for speaking up, and thanking me for my courage in speaking up.”

It follows from the personal experiences recounted above that the most opposed advocacy tactics and strategies by the participants were the ones that unfairly limited their ability to speak freely in the public domain. Of course, the most obvious opposition was to violence and incitement to and threats of violence, including death threats. Neither side of the LGBT rights issue would condone those. One participant opposed confrontational tactics which might bring about violence, such as organising counter-protest demonstrations on the same day and at a nearby location. Still, one prominent pro-LGBT rights advocate made a caveat to violent tactics: that if the lives of any oppressed group are at stake, then violence is an understandable reaction. Of course, such extreme circumstances would be far beyond the levels of conflict relevant to Singapore today. Perhaps what is more relevant then is a discussion about what threatens personal harm short of violence – tactics such as outing LGBT persons, posting personal details of your opponents on the internet and getting them fired from their jobs.

The most problematic advocacy tactic identified by both sides was discussion-chilling speech that ranges from name-calling, to vilification, and hate speech.

To both sides, this tactic has prevented society from having needful proper discussions over serious issues and judging from their responses - the most singular point of agreement among the participants.

Unfortunately, agreement means little when each side accuses the other of being adept at this tactic. Adding nuance to this point were three pro-LGBT rights advocates who expressed concern about where to draw the line between provocative speech and speech which should be regarded as out of order. To them, this line is given to subjective opinion and is not easily drawn. After all, since the LGBT rights issues involve social identities and deeply held beliefs, they felt that the line between what is public and what is personal is not very clear.

Another area of much concern is advocacy in schools and universities. Coming mainly from the anti-LGBT side of the issue, a few advocates expressed opposition to intervention in school curriculum and the pro-LGBT bias of at least one professor in a local university. At the very least, the anti-LGBT rights advocates said that there should be some mechanism to enforce a balance of sources in curriculum and other activities in these educational institutions.

One last area of questionable tactics both sides of the argument would prefer not to see may be described as “astroturfing” in the American vernacular. This is where one side misrepresents the size of their support or backing in the community when they use fraudulent signatures in their petitions. On a note of

caution however - one participant opined it is important to recognise that neither side of the conflict has monolithic organisations and movements, and that within each organisation, there could be some amount of disagreement about which tactics are acceptable and which are not.

Against the background of the above personal experiences and what the participants felt were the worst kinds of advocacy behaviour, it is not surprising that there was deep division on the prospects of forging understanding and respect between the two agonistic, even antagonistic sides. The response to this question fell largely into three groups. The first group which was the majority of participants felt that there was some hope to forging understanding and respect, though not without some conditions. The second group, composed largely but not wholly of anti-LGBT rights advocates who were very pessimistic about the chances of forging understanding and respect. The last and smallest group, composed by a handful of pro-LGBT rights advocates felt that either there was no need to forge understanding and respect, or that to force this would actually be unhealthy for society.

For those who thought that understanding and respect between the two camps was possible, the most interesting points were about the conditions that were needed to achieve that. One anti-LGBT rights advocate had a very practical idea – systematically recording and disseminating representative views from each side and different positions from each side such as from different religious



groups would help as people would not need to go over the same points of contention over and over again.

Others had more abstract conditions – the need for advocates to act in good faith so as to foster open and frank discussion, add personal stories into the conversations, include people who seem less outspoken or invested into the process, ensure that pro-LGBT rights advocates play by democratic republican rules and accepted democratic provisionality, and have anti-LGBT rights advocates soften their demand to have their religious beliefs accounted for in all public policy.

Nevertheless, there was a small group of LGBT rights advocates who expressed that any open and frank discussion would succeed only if the playing field was first levelled. As one pro-LGBT rights advocate put it, “(t)he status quo structurally disrespects LGBT people by criminalising them, by making the experiences and their stories taboo, so no genuine mutual respect and understanding can be produced until we recognise that fact.” A second pro-LGBT added that the LGBT community would love to educate their opponents and the general public about the intricacies regarding the “hot button” issues that already form barriers to open discussion, but they do not have the platform to execute this. A third pro-LGBT said that media bias against equal and fair representation of LGBT themes had to be lifted before any meaningful dialogue could happen. It should be noted here that a small number of anti-LGBT rights

advocates expressed a desire to learn how certain terms and discussions were deemed to be loaded against LGBT interests.

In contrast with the first guarded but positive attitude, a number of participants expressed deep pessimism about the prospects of forging understanding and respect. One pro-LGBT rights advocate felt that the actions of the anti-LGBT side had thus far shown that the values of the latter depended on ignorance and that they were not genuinely interested in forging any understanding at all.

The number of anti-LGBT rights advocates who accused the pro-LGBT of the same intransigence however, was larger. A handful of anti-LGBT rights advocates saw themselves as the last bastion of good values, working to stop pro-LGBT rights advocates who seemed too absolutist and militant with their “rough tactics” to come to an understanding. As one anti-LGBT rights advocate saw it, “...while we can, we gotta [sic] really be really robust about it in pushing back. Therefore I think that the divide is too fundamental.” These advocates could not see any middle ground and since pro-LGBT demands were viewed as a slippery slope to worse immorality, they felt they had to stand their ground at the present moment.

A third popular position on the question of understanding and respect was to deny the great need for one or both. One pro-LGBT rights advocate for example, opined that respect was immediately possible, but understanding, something that would take more time if ever, to be achieved. Another pro-LGBT

rights advocate had a somewhat similar view - that certain contentious and controversial issues could become accepted without understanding. He said, "Certain things become irrelevant over time. We may never reach understanding. We may just reach irrelevance." Three pro-LGBT rights advocates, however, approached the issue from a more agonistic political standpoint. Their approach was basically to question the need for understanding and respect since it was perfectly healthy, in their minds, that there was some level of public contestation over public matters. As a society, we must allow more space for disagreement and not less, was the view. Contestation would raise public awareness of real differences among citizens and should not be viewed as disrespect. As one pro-LGBT rights advocate expressed it, "(i)n between hate and love there are many, many gradations in which we can continue to be co-citizens, co-workers. Sometimes people who[sic] disagree vehemently with each other and quite dislike each other and yet at other times people who pull together. This is the sort of maturity we need in Singapore to move forward."

When it comes to Sanctity of Life issues, the advocates come up against similar challenges as their LGBT rights counterparts. For example, one anti-death penalty advocate shared that his greatest challenge was the lack of access to the media as well as access to schools. Another example would be the challenge of finding suitable public venues that would be willing to host politics-related events. People who manage public venues were often reluctant to host an event when informed that a police license would be needed for it.

Still, just as with the LGBT rights issues above, perhaps the most common challenging experience for Sanctity of Life advocates has been objectionable speech directed at them, their families and even their clients online - what we understand today as “trolling”. As one anti-death penalty advocate described, “It’s not just us but sometimes the families of death row inmates, they get the whole “you deserve it as well, your brother deserved it but you deserve it as well”. The worst story related to us, however, was from a pro-choice advocate who described threats of physical violence, when the largely secular organisation to which the participant belonged decided to hold talks during Ramadan for its Muslim members.

Nevertheless, successful outreach in later years proved to be very rewarding for that participant. This was echoed by a pro-life advocate who found it rewarding to help people regain a hold on their lives and restore a sense of purpose through the organisation’s help.

As a result of the similarities with the LGBT rights issues concerning their challenging experiences, Sanctity of Life issue advocates were similarly concerned about the incitation of violence and the use of hate speech and spoken invective in public advocacy. They were of the same opinion that these tactics should be eradicated from Singapore’s public political space. One pro-choice participant also expressed rejection of any party that might seek to impose their views and cast suspicions of sinister motives on their opponent.

Despite the similarities however, the Sanctity of Life issue advocates were far more optimistic about forging understanding and respect between opposing sides. In fact, one participant went as far as to point out the bias in the question: “That’s assuming they don’t respect each other.” Another participant suggested that the main problem with public advocacy in this set of issues had to do with behaviour online, and not with what happened in face-to-face encounters. A third participant added that the collegiality of discussions experienced in the project could not be generalised over the whole population – most people are not able to discuss things openly and peacefully with others with whom they disagree.

### **3.4 Engagement on Social Media**

The question of whether social media has had a positive or negative effect on society as far as the LGBT issue was concerned was perhaps the most unpopular question in this study and moved the fewest participants to speak. Nevertheless, the pattern that emerged from the answers was clear. Pro-LGBT rights advocates were more likely to reply in the positive than anti-LGBT rights advocates. The few responses from anti-LGBT rights advocates were either negative or neutral.

For the LGBT community, participants said, social media was viewed positively by members and their advocates because it allowed the community to overcome the problem of censorship by the state. It was because the online space was not censored that first, the LGBT community and their advocates

could organise themselves without relying on notices in publications that would probably not run them for fear of running afoul of the law; second, the LGBT were able to share stories and experiences and give each other information and support which was especially important for the younger LGBT people; and third, through it, the public at large had become more exposed to LGBT issues and stories as they did not need to rely on censored local mainstream media for information.

In general, these pro-LGBT rights advocates were aware that there is a lot of unsavoury speech online, but they believed that since social media has been good in promoting democratic culture in Singapore by giving people freedom of expression on issues still considered rather taboo, and that it was not possible to eradicate all the negative speech; they recognised that objectionable speech was a necessary evil that they would take as a trade-off.

In contrast, five anti-LGBT rights advocates said social media has had a negative effect on balance. Two of them said it allowed the pro-LGBT voices to become disproportionately louder. Another anti-LGBT rights advocate felt that while the internet provided a whole new range of possibilities for free speech, this was happening: “[W]hat we have now is horizontal chilling, whereby civil society or whatever flames a private citizen and basically silences moral dissent. And this is very real.” Another two anti-LGBT rights advocates blamed the anonymity of online speech for breeding a sense of viciousness that one would not see in real life.

Three anti-LGBT rights advocates however, felt that social media had a balanced effect of good and bad. Their position was shaped by the notion that the internet is a tool that can be used for good or for bad; they had used it to their own benefit as much as their opponents had done the same.

Despite this strong pattern in views about the positive or negative impact of social media on the way the LGBT issue has been discussed in society, the response to whether rules of engagement should be enacted for regulating that space was mixed, with each side of the issue expressing different views. Still, the plurality if not the majority of the participants preferred not to have any rules of engagement.

Thus, only a minority of participants felt that it was on balance, a good idea to institute rules of engagement online. Two anti-LGBT rights advocates and two pro-LGBT rights advocates were very concerned about the lack of civility online and would like, minimally, a code of civil conduct online if not government intervention on defamatory remarks. Two other pro-LGBT rights advocates wanted some rules to protect vulnerable LGBT groups from online attacks.

Despite this agreement on the need for some regulation, there was division on the question of who should provide it along the pro/anti LGBT line. The four pro-LGBT advocates who were concerned with the lack of civility or the vulnerability of certain groups did not want the government to step in. They preferred these rules of engagement to be socially created and enforced in a communal, self-

policing way. The two anti-LGBT rights advocates, as indicated above, preferred a statist solution where the government would impose some censorship laws or some kind of public education programme.

The plurality if not the majority of participants, however, felt that rules of engagement were not necessary, though for a variety of reasons. One anti-LGBT rights advocate contributed the thought-provoking opinion that rules of engagement were a non-issue because while social media was indeed a convenient form of communication, it was not a proper platform to discuss serious issues. Another perspective, given by three pro-LGBT rights advocates was that rules of engagement were not needed because they would have a chilling effect on free speech which social media had been so important in countering. As one of them put it, "(I)f you are trying to advocate for a more diverse, more accepting society, that same token should be extended to people who are against you, and they should be allowed to say what they want. So you can't have your cake and eat it".

Perhaps the most common perspectives on why there should not be any rules of engagement were that most, if not all spaces online are self-policing, that a person has the freedom not to read and not to engage and that where conduct gets seriously objectionable, the laws on the books were already there to deal with that. In general, these participants believed that serious breaches of good conduct were already covered by existing laws and were optimistic that the less egregious remainder could be handled appropriately by the community of social



media users and moderators. Failing that, one always had the option of not participating in conversations one found repugnant, they said. As one participant put it, "(T)hen it becomes self-policing. An idiot will look like idiot and then he or she will look like an idiot and people [will] have a laugh at it. I think too much [sic] rules may end up being counter-productive and everybody shut[s] up and we end up not talking.

One interesting perspective that emerged from an anti-LGBT rights advocate was that while the existing laws covered a wide swath of objectionable behaviour, they had yet to be tested and would probably not do enough to protect free speech from certain types of bullying behaviours that suppress democratic discussion. While some form of rules of engagement seemed necessary, there was still need for a public debate about what would foster good democratic debate from which rules could then be crafted to instil that democratic culture.

Given how the plurality if not the majority of participants would rather not have any intervention in the social media space, it was no surprise that very little was suggested with regard to the platforms for that. Since self-policing and self-regulation were the most popular responses, it was not surprising that the most popular responses here were for civic leaders and role models to take the lead or for each internet platform's moderators and users to decide their own internal rules. For the former, one pro-LGBT rights advocate lamented the lack of civic role models in Singapore who could show their followers and supporters how

to behave civilly while dealing with opponents. This advocate believed that while government leaders might play a part, they were not necessary for this purpose. One anti-LGBT rights advocate countered this lamentation by offering to work with pro-LGBT rights advocates to create and disseminate rules of good civil behaviour to all their followers and supporters. Unfortunately, the pro-LGBT movement leaders present were ones who were sceptical of the usefulness of rules of engagement since their online platforms were already self-policing. For the latter, one pro-LGBT rights advocate and one anti-LGBT rights advocate believed that it would be better for each online platform to moderate itself. Even if there were to be rules of engagement, they should not be general for everyone but specific for each platform. The pro-LGBT rights advocate illustrated that point in the following way: “I guess broad principles, yes, it’s easier to get broad principles, but when you go down to very [sic] specifics, like you shouldn’t name-call, some groups might have larger thresholds for name-calling them or others.”

Yet, one very moderate anti-LGBT rights advocate preferred rules of engagement to be created by a working committee comprising government, community and movement leaders. For this participant, such a committee would provide a larger context for people to understand the opposite viewpoint. One participant even remarked that the Institute of Policy Studies could provide a platform since he found his focus group discussion fruitful. Of course, the anti-LGBT rights advocates who expressed above that the government should be the ones to regulate the social media space believed that ultimately, it was the

government that had to provide the platform and exercise its authority. As expressed by one of them, “If father say, in my house, this is not acceptable, then it’s done.”

One participant suggested that a debate about what makes for good democratic debate was needed before rules of engagement could be crafted. This person suggested that the process could commence with an essay competition that set out the premise of a democratic problem and invited solutions that would identify those beliefs and practices that suppress free speech. This platform solution is of course a long-term solution that would address future and not current circumstances.

When it came to the Sanctity of Life issues, the advocates were mostly positive about the effect of social media for their cause. One anti-death penalty advocate and one pro-choice advocate said that since their access to mainstream media was limited, social media had become the next best alternative to reach out to the mass public and disseminate information. In a similar vein, a pro-life advocate said that online platforms had been useful in providing platforms for dialogue, whatever may come out of that: “Whereas previously there was no such platform, at least now you open up the dialogue... Yeah, sometimes we open up a can of worms as well, but at least now there is an existing platform. So, I think that’s good.”

On an interesting structural and organisational note, the anti-death penalty advocate also added that online platforms had helped his organisation reach out to international advocacy counterparts as well as lowered the barrier to entry into the local civil society landscape by making it possible for very small groups to have a significant public presence.

Thus, with regard to setting up rules of engagement, it was predictable that they were mostly not very keen on them. At base, four participants opined that informal rules of engagement did already exist, but anonymity online made enforcement difficult, if not impossible. As one of them said rather colourfully, “It’s like what your Tommy Koh used to say about international law. There’s no law.”

Instead, rather than instituting rules of engagement from scratch, the participants were more in favour of changing Singaporean culture through education. Whether through advocacy training for adults or instilling lessons in schools or even by having parents be role models for their children, the participants believed that the only real solution to the current online malaise would be to cultivate a culture of tolerance towards different perspectives and views, and develop a thicker skin when dealing with others with whom you do not agree with. One of them described the effect of civility education - “Even if you think you’re right, be civil about it, rather than to use power to end the argument.

On the question of platforms for building this proposed civic culture, one participant was quick to suggest that IPS could be a good platform to hold public fora on these issues. Still, this was quickly countered by another participant who preferred closed-sessions where participants might be more restrained, having no need to play to the gallery. This participant added that a neutral venue was paramount as mutually opposed advocates would find it difficult to sit down with each other while they held preconceptions about each other. A third participant also countered the first by pointing out that the need for police licenses and the reluctance of venue owners to host potentially controversial issues made public fora difficult to execute. A fourth participant added that even student groups on campuses were now asked by their schools not to invite potentially controversial guests. This development hindered open and honest conversations over cultural and moral cleavages such as the Sanctity of Life issues.

### **3.5 Directions for Future Research**

Before we began each focus group discussion or interview, we asked our participants to look to the horizon and think of future political and social cleavages that may affect Singaporean society. While these may be topics that the current cohort of participants may have little personal involvement in, it was an interesting exercise because many of the participants at these discussions were public intellectuals and/or members of civil society groups.

Out of about a dozen or so topics or research areas, the two most raised issues were Sanctity of Life issues (i.e. euthanasia, abortion and death penalty) and “new immigrants” (including integration issues, intra-racial tensions), on which about half a dozen people each thought might be problem in the future. While, of course, we were not surprised about the mention of these two sets of issues, it was somewhat surprising that “new immigrants” emerged given the seeming decreasing salience of that issue in the public political space.

The next two most popular issues, with three to four voices raising them were “religion in the public square” (including “creeping theocracy”, secularism and freedom of religion issues) and “economic inequality” (including worker’s rights, industrial relations, social safety net and class cleavage issues). Since both the LGBT issues and Sanctity of Life issues have religious implications in their backgrounds, the direct issue of “religion in the public square” was bound to gain more public attention in Singapore sooner rather than later. Also, given the global economic climate and global sentiment regarding banks, the “1 percent” and wealth inequality, it would not be unexpected if the issue were to gain more prominence in Singapore, where concerns over the minimum wage issue have been politically salient.

The next group of issues with two mentions in our sessions with participants were intra-religious tensions, the reappearance of historical Singaporean religious and ethnic cleavages, radical Islam, and animal rights. Apart from animal rights, which may be an indicator of increasingly post-materialist values,

the other three issues suggest that importance of religion and how issues surrounding it transgress international boundaries. Even for a secular state, the responses suggest that religion as a public issue would be likely to occupy us for a very long time yet.

A handful of single-mention issues close out this section. Most are familiar political fodder in Singapore - detention without trial, freedom of expression and casinos. Perhaps the more novel issues cited were intergenerational justice, (including environment issues, national debt, etc.), refugees, privacy rights, legalising recreational drugs and the trust deficit that the masses have with the “ruling class”. These issues are exercising the minds of citizens in the West right now and it is not uncommon for Western societies to act as bellwethers for issues that might come to our doorstep in the medium to long term.

## 4. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

*“Because it is always possible to invoke a reason and redescribe the accepted application of our political concepts (paradiastole), it is always necessary to learn to listen to the other side (audi alteram partem), to learn the conditional arguments that support the various sides (in utramque partem), and so to be prepared to enter into deliberations with others on how to negotiate an agreeable solution (negotiation).”*

James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key*

### 4.1 Points of Contention

It is easy in a research study like this to get overwhelmed by the sheer range of different opinions and reactions and get distracted by the inappropriate and irrelevant task of settling the highly-charged moral disagreement that play out. This chapter distils the central points of discussion and argument, but it would behoove us to also remind ourselves that coming to a moral consensus is not only something beyond the scope of this study but is something intentionally rejected under its rubric. In Chapter 1, we laid out the reasons why, in order that we might come to terms with the new age of value pluralism in Singapore, agonistic pluralism theory might provide us with a suitable model. We laid out the reasons why we neither can nor should eradicate value pluralism in our society and why channelling them in benign ways by allow moral contestations to play out in a civil and democratic fashion is the most pragmatic solution in a non-ideal situation.

So, in using this model, we will try to analyse what the most reducibly basic points of political and moral contention are. As we try to disentangle any confusions relating to the demands of democratic values, we will not attempt to settle the basic moral disagreement. This is not to deny that morality has a



relevant and important part to play in our political decision-making, but only to point out that the role of democratic politics is to make decisions about the entire polity without presuming the final moral answers. If we are to give value pluralism its due, then we must accept that everything in a democratic society, even its most basic regulative principles and the most privileged positions can be legitimately challenged.

When it comes to the LGBT rights issue, part of the basic contention is whether LGBT persons were born with their sexual identities. As many pro-LGBT rights advocates argued in the project, that LGBT sexual identities are seen as a fact of birth and so the community, it was argued, deserved rights as a protected minority. At the same time, anti-LGBT rights advocates denied this claim of birth condition and hence denied the claim to special minority rights akin to those that protect minority races. Also, it is worth noting that while a few anti-LGBT rights advocates might concede that same-sex attraction might be something someone was born with, most would argue that it was specifically same-sex sexual behaviour that they objected to; behaviour is a choice, they would say.

Whether or not same-sex attraction is a condition at birth or is a choice is clearly an empirical question that is beyond the scope of this study. The same can perhaps be said of whether or not sexual behaviour is entirely a choice if same-sex attraction is not. For while heterosexual people might and some do choose to be celibate, to force celibacy on people born with same-sex attraction seems to be no less onerous than forcing it on heterosexual people.

Nevertheless, the political question here really is whether considerations on whether a particular identity is natural-born or not is relevant in the decision to award protective rights. That is to say, even if we presuppose hypothetically that same-sex sexual behaviour is completely a choice, should the fact that it is a choice be sufficient grounds to deny protection?

If society wants to use choice as a principle to decide whether an identity is worth protecting, then that is a political question that must be discussed explicitly and democratically. It is a fair point of political contention and the political conversation on it has not yet been had.

Two preliminary issues point to the viability of a contestation. First, it is accepted by academic researchers that race is socially constructed. There is far more genetic variation within races than there is among races. Of course, race as a category does not appear ex nihilo, out of nowhere, but it is not entirely a matter of birth. Second, religious belief, and more so religious practice, are choices. While one may be born into a family of a certain religious affiliation, one can, as many people have, decide to change one's affiliation or not have one at all.

To argue the above is not to say that religious belief and practice should not be protected. Rather, it is to say that other considerations may be more important than the issue of whether an identity category is a choice or not. Neither is it the point here to judge which choices are good and which choices are bad. The point is that whether choice is by itself grounds for denying protection or

whether it may be trumped by other considerations is, democratically speaking, conceptually prior to deciding which choices to protect or punish and is therefore a separate and distinct contention.

A second point of contention in the LGBT rights issue has to do with status harm. Pro-LGBT rights advocates argued that the LGBT community should be awarded protective rights because it suffers from status harm: that is to say, members of this identity group suffer harm because of and on the basis of being members of this identity group. The claim is that as LGBT individuals, they suffer from discrimination in the workplace and the military, rejection by family, social isolation by peers, and the criminalisation of sodomy from Section 377A. These practices, for the lack of a better word, causes LGBT material and psychic harm, sometimes pushing individuals to take their own lives. One reported issue is how Section 377A has the implication of suppressing reports of sexual crimes, since victims are afraid that they would be implicated in the crime of sodomy regardless of their victim status.

Anti-LGBT rights advocates mostly if not unanimously agreed that material discrimination (like being fired for being an LGBT individual) is wrong and they would support such victims. There seem to be some positive support for the plight of LGBT persons in the military, for example. However, many if not most of the anti-LGBT did not believe that material discrimination like this is widespread. The contention here seems to therefore rest on how much empirical evidence can be mobilised or otherwise towards proving material

harm. Part of the problem, as conceded by a couple of the pro-LGBT rights advocates participating, is that most of the LGBT organisations are relatively new and empirical evidence of the sort sought after has not been compiled for long.

Nevertheless, it might be mentioned that evidence of discrimination is often empirically hard to prove. Apart from very overt instances where the perpetrator might verbally express his or her prejudice using hateful words, perpetrators often cover their prejudice with innocuous reasons. Firing an LGBT person from his or her job can be hidden behind an accusation of insubordination or subjective evaluations of performance for example. Overall, structural discrimination occurring over large populations over time must often rely on large and expensive academic studies to uncover.

Having said this, the discrimination that LGBT persons face in the Singaporean military is a matter of overt government policy and can be thought of as general knowledge within the country. Perhaps this is one area in which pro-LGBT rights advocates will not face opposition from anti-LGBT rights advocates if they were to lobby the public and the government for equal rights. As yet, there is little to no pro-LGBT public lobbying on this particular front.

Some of the anti-LGBT rights advocates also argued that the kind of unfortunate treatment LGBT persons receive from their families or friends who reject their sexual identity is a matter of private tribulations that should not

concern the state. At least twice, anti-LGBT rights advocates compared this situation to other situations like pregnant teens being disowned by their parents or fat kids being picked on by their peers.

Like the above, the harm from cases like these is hard to identify and prove causally. Nevertheless, unless this social discrimination crosses the line into criminal harassment, the anti-LGBT rights advocates are right in insisting that the state cannot and should not do much about it. However, legality does not seem to be the point of contention for pro-LGBT rights advocates in this particular issue. Their approach to these type of cases seems to be from an educational rather than a legal angle. So, it would seem misplaced to identify the specific contention here as one about legal rights.

Rather, the real contention seems to be over the educational activities that pro-LGBT rights advocates are doing which the anti-LGBT rights advocates reject as attempts at normalisation. Anti-LGBT rights advocates argued that parents and relatives had the moral right to reject their LGBT offspring or relative and that social rejection by peers was part of social reality about which one cannot do anything. In this case, anti-LGBT rights advocates did not seem concerned with empirical evidence. This issue of normative normalisation, though, will be raised again when we discuss the fundamental moral conflict later.

A third point of contention in the LGBT rights issue has been over whether the protective rights demanded by the LGBT community are special or general.

Many anti-LGBT rights advocates agreed that, as alluded to above, LGBT persons should have the right that protect themselves from harm as anybody else should. However, it was argued that they should not have any additional, special rights such as those accorded to say, the Malay community in Singapore. Anti-LGBT rights advocates argued that because a new category of rights have to be created to protect the LGBT community, then the demanded rights could be construed as being special and not general rights. An example from one of anti-LGBT rights advocates was how when it came to “marriage equality”, gay men were already allowed the same rights as straight men, that is to say, they were allowed to marry women. (Obversely, both gay and straight men were therefore barred from marrying other men as that would be special rights).

Nevertheless, pro-LGBT rights advocates objected to the above argument on the basis that it relied on an unfair precedent. They argued that the above argument was based on privileging heterosexual norms and preferences, enshrining them in law as the universal foundation for all decisions and judgments in society. (This privileged point of view is often called “heteronormativity” in political theory literature.) Without the presumption that these privileged values are universal, pro-LGBT rights advocates argued that the rights they claim should be construed as equal and not special rights. Conversely, to resist LGBT rights claims by dismissing them as claims for special rights is to assume exactly that which is being challenged.

Without passing comment on the substance of the rights claims, what is clear is that even if we take pro-LGBT rights advocates as calling for equal and not special rights, their claims are nothing less than a challenge to the assumed normative foundations of society. While this is no small matter, in a truly democratic polity, even the assumed background normative foundations of society must be open to democratic challenge. Democratically speaking, the basic disagreement is reduced to why heterosexual preferences are justified in forming the normative basis of society, but pro-LGBT rights advocates have the prima facie democratic right to challenge this normative basis through legitimate means.

On the other hand, the divide over whether same-sex sexual behaviour is morally acceptable still remains unclosed. Anti-LGBT rights advocates retain their prima facie democratic right to defend the status quo on society's normative foundations through democratic means also. However, this divide cannot justifiably be bridged by assuming privileged mores, the justification of which is being challenged in the first place – this would be tantamount to justifying the status quo by simply reasserting it. Again, the basic moral contention will be looked at separately below.

A fourth point of contention in the LGBT rights issue is on the role of religion in the public square. This issue raises questions about what it means for Singapore to be a nominally secular country. On one side, many pro-LGBT rights advocates claim that since Singapore has a secular constitution, it means

that religion should not have any role in public discourse about her laws and policies. However, on the other side, many anti-LGBT rights advocates who are religiously-minded believed that our secularism was designed to balance the claims of different religions, rather than to reject religion outright. And further, since religion speaks to the make-up of one's moral beliefs, then religious motivations were clearly, a legitimate part of democratic public discourse.

However, in so far as we are interested in the democratic tradition of public discourse about the common good, it seems that only what is called "public reason" by political theorists can be legitimately used in arguments. That is to say, since democratic discourse is arguing about what constitutes the common good in public matters that affect us all, then the only reasons that can have purchase in such a discourse are those that everyone could hypothetically have a rationale to consider true. Reasons stemming from revealed truths have no public purchase if one's fellow interlocutors do not subscribe to the same revealed belief system. For an argument to have political purchase on fellow citizens, it must appeal to some common set of beliefs, assumptions or experiences.

Having said that, the more prominent anti-LGBT rights advocates in Singapore have commendably attempted to give public reasons for their opposition to LGBT rights and pro-LGBT activities. As we have covered in Chapter 3 above, many anti-LGBT rights advocates have been conscientious in providing arguments from our shared Asian culture, traditional family structures and



support systems, healthy child-rearing and concerns over public health. Despite this, though, one can still observe some individuals on online platforms continuing to make arguments based on outright appeal to their religious beliefs. However, with many anti-LGBT rights advocates having conceded this point, perhaps the larger point of contention is really not about reasons but about motivations. For it is the contention of some pro-LGBT rights advocates that even religious motivations are illegitimate in the public square – that if one’s religious motivations lead one to lobby through secular arguments, one could still be construed as trying to impose one’s religious beliefs on others.

Anti-LGBT rights advocates in the project reacted by arguing that since religious beliefs were deeply embedded in one’s moral conscience, it was legitimate to be moved to speak from religious motivations as long as the arguments offered appealed to public reasons rather than revealed truths. There are a couple of reasons to finding this acceptable as a political standard.

First, since democratic discourse is primarily interested in public discourse with public reasons, it would seem inappropriate to focus on the private thoughts and motivations of one’s opponents in one’s public rebuttals. What would count in public discourse would be the logic and reasons given in expressed policy submissions and the logical implications that can be inferred from those expressed policy submissions. The full range of practical implications of a policy submission can be induced and debated on its merits without projecting sinister

motivations on one's opponents. As such, democratically speaking, religious motivations do not invalidate the public reasons which they inspire.

Second, in a competitive agonistic democratic contest for public laws and policy, the more that focus is placed on motivations, the more likely parties start to mutually construct each other as enemies whose demonisation is legitimate. When this happens, parties would be mutually unable to perceive the other as legitimate rivals with the democratic right to express and campaign for policy prescriptions. Democratic competition could run the risk of degenerating into a contest of pure power, which as we discussed in Chapter 1, is contrary to democratic interests of the country. Also, mutual construction of the other party as enemies encourages the fear that policy decisions are likely to be final affairs rather than democratically provisional decisions open to future overturn.

Making this line of argument, however, is not to say that motivations are never relevant to political decision-making. There could be times when one's opponents are not in fact motivated to seek the betterment of society, and could indeed be intentionally dangerous to society, but unless one has independent proof of this, speculations are an unfair advocacy tactic. At most times, one's opponents share the motivation to make society better, but have a different and contending vision of what is good for society. Thus, in order to prevent misunderstandings, perhaps it would be useful practice for all sides of contentious policy issues to declare their motivations.

A fifth point of contention, the normalisation of LGBT sexual identities, is deeply involved with what points two and three above seem to reduce to: the basic moral disagreement. It is because anti-LGBT rights advocates view same-sex sexual behaviour as immoral, whether for inherently religious reasons or for its practical consequences as recorded in Chapter 3, most are against educational activities by LGBT organisations that aim to normalise LGBT sexual identities. On the other side, as alluded to above, pro-LGBT rights advocates have been attempting to educate the public about LGBT issues in order to change public sentiment on LGBT identities and consequently change what they perceive to be legal, employment and social discrimination.

Setting aside foundational religious beliefs, that moral beliefs in general are legitimate considerations for democratic discourse is not a controversial or even new thought. Some pro-LGBT rights advocates have made moral counter-arguments of their own. Some have argued that same-sex sexual behaviour is morally acceptable because they consist of acts done in private between consenting adults. Others have offered more political counterarguments where it is argued that even if same-sex sexual behaviour were to be universally considered immoral, like adultery, it is not a proper candidate for legislation. The pro-LGBT rights advocates in the project pointed to the fact that contemporary democracies are more commonly excluding social mores regarding sexual behaviour from state interference. The grounds for both counterarguments are based on the principle that the right to privacy in a democratic polity protects certain behaviours from state intervention.

Anti-LGBT rights advocates like those in the project, however, believe that sexual behaviour is not a wholly private realm when there are clear negative public repercussions: the first being the spread of LGBT sexual identities (especially among the young) and the second being the breakdown of traditional family structures to the detriment of society and the third being concerns for public health. According to this line of argument, LGBT sexual behaviour harms others and this trumps any claim to privacy. However, both these claims depend on empirical evidence that is outside the scope of this project. The former claim hinges on whether sexual behaviour is truly a choice such that non-LGBT persons can be influenced into taking on LGBT identities for themselves. The latter claim is a public health claim that we cannot comment on here.

Nevertheless, even though this moral disagreement is publicly predicated on disagreement about consequences rather than the inherent morality of sexual behaviours, as a matter of politics, society cannot foreclose on either side without foreclosing on moral fallibility. As far as the democratic right to challenge principles of public policy is concerned, LGBT rights advocates have the democratic right to attempt to change people's minds in so far as they have the right to lobby the public for political change. Anti-LGBT rights advocates, however, maintain the rights to both believe in and teach (under private circumstances) the immorality of same-sex sexual behaviours and to lobby the public to accept this opinion. Within reasonable restrictions to prevent public

confrontations that may lead to violence, neither side should be deprived of the ability to convince their fellow citizens of their moral stand.

Of course, this contest about basic moral positions should only happen if it is decided that rights to privacy are trumped by public harm. Democratically speaking, this point of contention is conceptually prior to the contention about whether normalisation efforts for LGBT identities cause public harm. It is noted here that Singaporeans do not have a pre-existing legal right to privacy, but the question of whether or not we should have it is open to political contention in the first place. Just like the issue of whether or not choice should be a bona fide political principle, the issue of the right of privacy is also one which would clarify matters in this LGBT rights contestation because we have not yet had the political conversation on it.

A sixth point of contention that arose in the FGDs revolves around minority status. On one hand, the LGBT community is a minority group in that it clearly represents a small fraction of the total population. While issues of discrimination do not necessarily involve minority status, it can be inferred from what our pro-LGBT participants said, that the minority status of LGBT persons adds to their feeling of isolation and vulnerability and their negative self-perceptions, especially while they are young. As recorded in Chapter 3, one pro-LGBT rights advocate spoke vividly about the emotional vulnerability of a young sixteen-year-old LGBT Singaporean who neither felt accepted nor normal. The public advocacy activities carried out by pro-LGBT organisations have been aimed at

changing the hearts and minds of the majority into accepting LGBT persons and their sexual identities.

On the other hand, despite some anti-LGBT rights advocates claiming that they represent the views of the majority of Singaporeans, other anti-LGBT rights advocates expressed their vulnerability as a marginalised group too. One explanation for this tension is that while a plurality or even a majority of Singaporeans do not approve of LGBT identities, religious-minded anti-LGBT rights advocates form a small minority of this section of Singaporeans and their religious motivations may not be shared by others. In addition, anti-LGBT rights advocates perceive society to be moving in a more strictly secular direction. This might be related to a possible second explanation where we observe that while older Singaporeans are more likely to disapprove of LGBT identities, according to our participants on both sides, younger Singaporeans tend to be far more accepting or at least sympathetic. So when one anti-LGBT rights advocate spoke about another sixteen-year-old who was marginalised by his peers for his anti-LGBT beliefs, this experience cannot be invalidated out of hand. Both sixteen-year-olds can feel isolated and marginalised without contradiction.

Thus, the appearance that we have two opposing sides who perceive themselves as marginalised minorities may not necessarily be a contradiction. Much depends on which particular identity one is speaking about. It is hoped that considerations like this will temper any advocate's construction of his or

her opponent. Intersectionality, the idea that individuals are intersections of multiple identities, cuts both ways. Sometimes, on both sides of a disagreement may be individuals who are privileged in some ways and underprivileged in others.

A seventh point of contention also stems from a seeming contradiction. Both pro- and anti-LGBT rights advocates claimed that the media is biased against them and for their opponents. On the one hand, pro-LGBT rights advocates said that as a consequence of section 377A, state media policy bars local newspapers, television, radio, plays, visual art, and films from positive portrayals of LGBT people and relationships. Serious conversations about the plight of the LGBT community are similarly disallowed. On the other hand, anti-LGBT rights advocates claimed that there had been an increase in local newspaper coverage of pro-LGBT interviews and events. The inference is that this bias helps normalise LGBT identities which these advocates object to.

In so far that bias can be measured by the amount of coverage, it is quantifiable and therefore open to empirical study that is beyond this particular project. The anecdotal evidence however, seems to support the thesis that the policy against portrayals of LGBT persons and supportive opinions on the issue is no longer being strictly adhered to.

A stickier conceptual issue however, is whether the quantity of coverage alone is enough to prove bias, because it is arguable and contentious whether acknowledgement of pro-LGBT events and stories covering the plight of LGBT

persons is by itself tantamount to normalising LGBT identities. Further, the suppression of any sort of media coverage concerning the community limits its ability to combat the sort of material discrimination and public health issues which anti-LGBT rights advocates accept is a problem.

When it comes to Sanctity of Life issues, the relative lack of data is a limit on what analysis we may give the topic. While the moral disagreement seems on the face of it, just as intractable as with LGBT issues, this set of issues has yet to animate large followings on either side. While the absolute number of advocates on both sides of all Sanctity of Life issues is dwarfed by the numbers involved on both sides of the LGBT issue, one point of disagreement was prominent: how to measure the value of a life in relation to other goods.

In the case of abortion, the classic point of disagreement is of course how to measure the value of the foetus in comparison to the value of the mother's life and life choices, but our participants also pointed to the state and its involvement in the matter. An important issue is whether the state gets to proscribe something for the common good over the autonomy of the individual against the background that doing nothing would still be taken as giving moral permission. In this case, there does not seem to be any neutral position the state can take.

In the case of the death penalty, the value of a life is measured against the common good of the country in terms of physical safety and its moral climate,



and the point of contention is whether the state should be able to make that choice given the background that the decision-making process in such cases are cannot be infallible.

In the case of euthanasia however, the participants were less concerned with weighing the value of a patient's life to the possible benefit that shortening it might have for his or her family or society in general but with the issue of who can even begin to weigh the pros and cons and make the final decision.

Still, in all three cases there is a feeling that most Singaporeans only have an intellectual interest in these questions, whereas they might have firmer opinions and beliefs if they were personally affected by these situations. As yet, the Sanctity of Life issues seem abstract and advocates on either side of all three issues seemed to have some personal experience or were acquainted with people who were personally exposed or affected by them. As such, while the issue of religion in the public square is relevant here, much of the arguments expressed in public thus far have involved hypothesised reasons relating to the public good or individual good in the form of autonomy.

## **4.2 Fair Play**

The differences among the various camps of opinion notwithstanding, there was much more agreement about what sort of advocacy tactics and strategies participants found objectionable and what should be done about them. First, while perhaps unsurprising, it is heartening to note the consensus against violence and the incitement or threat thereof. In this day and age, it is perhaps

tiresome to hear the oft-repeated fact that it was not so long ago that this country was nearly torn apart by communal violence. That differences over deeply-held beliefs could sour enough to provoke violence is something we must bear in mind in an open society. Therefore, the consensus over it should not be taken for granted and must be preserved as best we can.

Second, there was also consensus against hate-speech, dehumanising speech and name-calling. However, there was also recognition that these terms and categories were by nature subjective and have undefined boundaries. Even if we could agree on clear definitions, different groups and communities might also have differing levels of tolerance for these objectionable practices. The biggest problem that can be inferred from the participants' input is that often, what one side takes as name-calling is the other side trying hard to make its moral case. So when an anti-LGBT rights advocate compared homosexuals with paedophiles or when an LGBT rights advocate said that the opponents were bigots, they were good faith efforts at moral arguments to prove their opponents wrong.

It would appear however that good faith is not enough when using highly-charged terms in one's moral arguments, when those terms have rhetorical effects that go far beyond the merits of whatever good faith moral argument one is trying to make. These rhetorical effects can include leading others to make inaccurate inferences of sinister motivations that result in the hasty construction of opponents into deadly enemies or the injection of fear that chills

speech. Name-calling has the tendency of causing argumentation to escalate into vilification, and as we have already seen earlier, constructing opponents as enemies is detrimental to fair contestation in a democracy. As for the chilling effect, name-calling sometimes forces an end to the exchange when legitimate rebuttals are still available. This happens when the opposing party is made to feel physically unsafe from the invective served unto them. It is self-evident that this chilling factor is undemocratic and artificially suppresses natural agonistic contestation in ways which make violent re-eruption more likely. If one is silenced by fear rather than the force of the better argument, then that silence is simply repression that may re-emerge later in unpredictable ways.

Third, participants were also against tactics that “personalise” what are inherently public debates. So, tactics such as publishing personal details online or attempting to get certain individuals fired from their jobs are considered out of bounds because they unfairly target an individual’s life rather than deal directly with the content of their public utterances. Thus, not only does this type of tactics cause material harm to opponents, they also have an unfair chilling effect on speech because similar to the above, the target of such tactics will be silenced by fear rather than argument.

Fourth, many participants were concerned about their opponents having access to schools and providing input to educational curriculum. While we uphold the rights of parties to campaign publicly for their causes, this right does not seem to overrule the right of parents to decide on the content of their minors’

or children's education. From democratic principles alone, access to schools is not something to which any party can claim a right. Universities however, are a different proposition because the students there are adults. (This by itself is open to challenge, of course, in which case a different conversation must take precedence.) Additionally, the university is place where the principle of academic freedom reserves the right for all kinds of views to be aired, even those considered repugnant by the general public.

In order to preserve the openness, the fairness and the level playing field of our public political space, it seems obvious that we must not only agree on what tactics and strategies should be left behind, but also how to affect that change. In the case of violence and its incitement or threat thereof, the majority of participants were happy to let the state carry on with its business of enforcing the law. The same is true regarding hate speech, defamation and individualised harassment because these issues are covered under existing law.

However, there was a significant minority of participants, mostly from the pro-LGBT rights advocacy side, who felt that the government had come down too hard on some cases of enforcing laws against objectionable speech. This group would prefer a less restrictive legal regime on free speech. Still, the problem does not seem to be that the state is doing too little such that there is too much hate speech in our public political space. This testifies to the trust Singaporeans currently have in the government - they believe that it would deal with the egregious cases of objectionable speech. Nevertheless, the advent of the

internet and social media has irreversibly changed social landscapes the world over and Singapore is no exception. When it comes to negative speech online that is short of falling foul of the law, our participants were mostly dismissive about the ability to enforce any formal rules of engagement. Except for a couple of exceptions, participants were very sceptical about there being any practical mechanism to do this. To the extent that it can be agreed what constitutes name-calling and other kinds of objectionable speech, this inability to enforce formal rules of engagement especially with regard to online material presents itself as a gap that cannot be closed. There are always ways to circumvent formal controls on speech online, as the Chinese government has long discovered.

Participants, however, seemed confident of the ability of individual social platforms to police themselves. In a throwback to the original intention of Enlightenment thinkers concerning free speech, the hope is that in a situation of free speech, “good” speech will sufficiently counter “bad” speech wherever the latter happens. Whether this principle can sufficiently temper the more unconstructive contributions to the public political space remains to be seen. What is worth noting is the sense that nothing can really be done at this end without detrimental changes to the way the internet works at its very foundations.

Nevertheless, there is something that can be done from the other end, as it were. While participants mostly interpreted questions about “rules of

engagement” to be about formal rules to be created and imposed from on high, we did not necessarily envision them as such. Rules of engagement range from national legislation, to user agreements on online forums, to social mores. The last of these possibilities garnered the least attention from our participants. A handful, however, agreed that it is possible to address that through educating the young. Parents can play a part in inculcating civil behaviour in all public spaces, virtual and actual, but one participant hoped schools and universities can play a significant role too in that respect.

It is unfortunate that most people outside of Scandinavia do not believe that it is possible to teach people how to be democratic citizens. It is often assumed to be something that comes naturally to people, but the history of humankind suggests that mob rule is the more natural (immediate) outcome of diffusing power to the masses. Just as it requires training for citizens to learn to obey authority, it also requires training to learn how to take part in discursive battles without resorting to unethical practices and least of all, force. In truth, there are many tools that are available today which can help us start on the journey. Essay competitions, model UNs and student committees of all sorts are already in place in our education structure in service of other ends, but they can also help students learn how to participate in a democracy. The challenge is to extend them beyond their current demographic to older citizens outside of the formal education system.

### 4.3 Platforms and Principles

Hence, while education is a good way to ensure that future generations learn how to cope with value pluralism in a democratic way, it does little for the value cleavages that confront us today and the adult advocates behind them who are past their formal education days. Despite the fact that our participants did not want or did not think it possible to have rules of engagement to police online speech, some suggested that live discussion platforms similar to our FGDs would still be helpful in tempering antagonisms among competing claimant groups. Having the organisation and movement leaders meet and discuss their differences might influence the conduct of their wider mass of supporters on both sides of any culture war issue.

To this end, even though our FGDs were designed more for information gathering than as a way to engage directly in this problem, it was not lost on us and our participants that they had been useful in developing a modality of engagement among contesting groups anyway. Participants said they went away with some level of increased understanding about the positions and the character of their opponents. While no grand accords were signed, at least some misconceptions had been clarified. Useful practices and some general principles in governing value cleavages, should other platforms for live discussion be envisaged, are as follows:

First, a suitable discussion platform must be perceived as a neutral platform. That is to say, staff working for the platform must reassure invited participants

that the platform will neither take on a preconceived moral stand on the affected issue nor make an overall moral judgment on conclusion of the discussions. While individuals working for the platform may have their personal convictions, as long as they comport themselves professionally, they should be able to get invitees to trust in the neutrality of the platform.

In our experience of organising the FGDs, there were a handful of invitees who withheld their acceptance of the invitation until they were assured that IPS was not going to take sides on the relevant substantive moral issues. And while moral neutrality might be anathema to some readers, this experience has taught us that the neutrality of the platform is a significant factor in the ability of participants to feel safe and in their confidence that they will be given the opportunity to be heard.

Second, a suitable discussion platform will function better if it is perceived as having some minimum level of social and/or political authority as a body concerned with the public good. As compared to any successful mediation process nationally or internationally, the mediating body will better gain the trust and co-operation of participants if it also has the respect of all parties involved. This might mean having a good track record of previous mediating roles, a good track record of rigorous social-political research, a formal connection with the democratic institutions of the country, and/or a good record of fair dealing with civil society groups.



In our experience in organising FGDs, we encountered a significant number of invitees who asked not to participate in mixed sessions. These individuals were largely afraid of retaliation from their issue opponents for things they might say at a mixed FGD. This was the reason why we held two FGDs on LGBT rights which were one-sided. A body with more authority than IPS might have been better able to assuage participants' concerns about privacy and security.

Third, it would be very useful if at least some of the discussions or conferences were held behind closed doors with some minimal assurances about protecting privacy. This would encourage frank and honest discussions and words spoken in good faith. One reason for this is that without a public audience, participants would have no gallery to which to play and so hopefully words would not be spoken simply for the rhetorical effect that they may have on one's constituents. As one of our participants remarked, "I also wonder, not sure, but just a thought, whether it's useful to do this kind of closed-door sessions where both sides come, sit down together and actually talk. Rather than do it in public, then they have [to] sometimes appeal to the supporters." Another reason is that in a political atmosphere where individuals may be targeted for unfair advocacy tactics, privacy accords some level of prevention.

Fourth, face-to-face meetings between opponents is an important part of the process. While there would still be some risk of hostilities ensuing and getting out of hand, they would be crucial in helping advocates on all sides reconstruct their opponents as legitimate rivals rather than sworn enemies. As one of our

participants remarked, this was “(b)ecause you always find that both sides tend not to be able to sit down together because everyone has either some misconception of the other side or the other side is just very hard to sit down and talk to.” It is much easier to dehumanise and demonise your opponents when they are not in the same room. It is also much easier to do these from the safe distance of the printed or electronic word.

Fifth, while we had limited ability to practise the following, it would be useful to invite participants whose identities intersect with the ones who are contending the value cleavage in question. Understanding that identities overlap would make it difficult for either side to see the situation as battle of “us vs them”. The perspectives of these individuals from within both identities may also give them insight into the value cleavage unavailable to others who are not in that overlapping situation.

To illustrate, in one of our FGDs, there was a participant who was both a member of the LGBT community and a religious leader. His clarifications regarding the right of religions to privately teach that homosexuality is immoral despite any potential liberalisation in the laws of the country seemed to have been reassuring to the anti-LGBT rights advocates present. Individuals like this can speak with some authority about their experiences in both worlds and the empathy they express for either side is harder to play down or dismiss.

Sixth, it was also observed during our FGDs that encouraging participants to tell personal stories is a useful practice in helping participants to deconstruct

their opponents as villains and monsters. Personal stories humanise the parties involved in the value cleavage and remind participants that conflicts have real effects on real people. Personal stories make claims harder to dismiss because even if the listeners might agree on the points made on principle, it would still be difficult to invalidate the real, lived experiences of fellow interlocutors.

For instance, one participant who was a pro-LGBT rights advocate wanted to convey just how distressed some young LGBT people were under the current conditions. He spun a story based on his experiences, of a hypothetical 16-year-old boy who felt isolated and vulnerable from being bullied in school because of his sexual identity. At this point, one anti-LGBT rights advocate participant described his own conservative 16-year-old boy who felt isolated and bullied by his peers because of his conservative views. What ensued was a quarrel about which boy had it worse. This episode concluded with both persons apologising to each other for saying that the other did not know what they were talking about. So, even though it was not settled in substance which 16-year-old boy did indeed have it worse, both parties involved retracted their invalidation of the other's experiences. Perhaps this moment of understanding would be less likely if advocates spoke exclusively in the abstract.

Seventh, we have a principle that has more general application: the provisional nature of public policy decisions. It was perceptible in the speeches of a number of our participants that they treated changes in public policy and legislation as irreversible. A number of participants spoke with the weight of finality – that if

they were to lose the current battle then things would never be reversed. One participant, for example, related how he had every opportunity to move to the United States, but chose to remain in Singapore because of local policies against social ills. However, if this ceased to be true, he said he could foresee many people emigrating.

However, in a democratic polity, this attitude is surely incorrect. If previously sedimented identities, values and procedures can be legitimately challenged by citizens today, then by extension, any decisions made today can be legitimately challenged by others in the future. Creating an ethos where citizens understand that policy decisions are by their very nature provisional may help claimant groups maintain their commitment to democratic discursive means. Claimant groups have to be given the hope that if they work hard within democratic parameters, their side would at least be heard out if not win the day at some point in the future. Conversely, if policy decisions were thought to be irreversible, that would give reason for claimant groups to believe that their situation is desperate and desperate people are more likely to resort to desperate measures. A thriving democracy is not judged by how noisily or how raucously the various parties or factions battle for elections or policy decisions but by how committed everyone is to settling their differences through democratic means no matter how much or how little they might disagree.

It is worth repeating that the scope of this study is political and its aim is to help in the general effort of maintaining a peaceful public political space in which

democratic values can be practiced well, and especially so with regard to value-laden public interest issues where the positions seem to be irreducible and conflict seems ineradicable.

To have this commitment to settle such issues through democratic means, is not however to presuppose that either popular sovereignty or classical liberal rights should always win the day. Neither is it to presume that perfect harmony in a diverse society is possible or even preferable. The business of democracy is difficult, but it is carried out nonetheless in order to find a unity of purpose where a unity of views is impossible. In the situation we find ourselves today, the more that Singaporeans become used to bargaining; agreeing to disagree; losing, winning, and trying again, the better would we be at channelling antagonism and hostility into more constructive, even if contentious activity.

The point is not to prevent anyone from ever striving for what they believe to be true. The point is not to force everyone to get along and like each other. The point of democracy is to be able to make decisions against a background of diversity, without losing parties feeling that they need to resort to arbitrary force and coercion.

To use a sporting analogy, we want competing claimant groups to see each other as rival competitors in the sporting arena rather than enemies on the battlefield. As such, war metaphors in public discourse must also be said to be unhelpful to what we are trying to achieve. We want strong and tough competition underlined by reasoned argument, fairness and sportsmanship.

We want Ali vs Frasier, not Hannibal vs Scipio. In a well-functioning democracy, the aftermath of each victory is followed by preparation for a rematch, not salting the earth.

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## ANNEX A

### “The New Singaporean Pluralism: SG50 and Beyond” FGD

This is the full range of questions that the facilitator may choose to pose.

<p>1. Apart from the issue at hand, what <i>other</i> cultural or ethical issues do you think might become politically contentious in Singapore in the near future? 1.a. What are the most controversial or intractable parts of these issues?</p>
<p>2. What do you think is the public sentiment on this issue right now? Will this change?</p>
<p>3. What do you think motivates the most outspoken public advocates and their opponents?</p>
<p>4. Do you think that it is possible that in time, opposing ends of this issue will come to understand if not respect each other? 4.a What do you think is the best way to help them come to a situation mutual understanding if not respect?</p>
<p>5. Can you share with us one of your most challenging or most rewarding experiences while advocating for this issue?</p>
<p>6. Which one of the following do you think is more effective in advancing your cause? a) Lobbying the Government or b) Lobbying the public. Why do you think so?</p>
<p>7. Are there any advocacy tactics or strategies you think should be regarded as out of bounds? Why?</p>
<p>8. On balance, has the advent of social media and other internet platforms had a positive or negative effect on society with respect to this issue?</p>
<p>9. Do you think it is a good idea to attempt to establish rules of engagement online? Why or why not?</p>
<p>10. Who should be responsible for coming up with rules of engagement online? The government, the people, community leaders, issue advocates themselves?</p>
<p>11. What are the ways or platforms you think we could use to invent and to disseminate such rules of engagement?</p>

**ANNEX B**

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Alex AU Wai Pang	Yawning Bread
Damien CHNG	We Believe in Second Chances
Paerin CHOA	Pink Dot SG
Bryan CHOONG	Oogachaga
Pastor Lawrence CHUA	Senior Pastor, Living Sanctuary Brethren Church
Pastor Leslie CHUA	Senior Pastor, Rock of Ages Church
Asst Prof. Lynette CHUA	National University of Singapore
Rev Daniel FOO	Senior Pastor, Bethesda (Bedok-Tampines) Church
Jennifer HENG	DaySpring New Life Centre
Serene HO	Personal capacity
Vanessa HO	Project X Singapore
K. Kathirasan	The Hindu Hub
Rev Lawrence KHONG	Senior Pastor, Faith Community Baptist Church
Assoc Prof. KHOO Hoon Eng	SAFE
Joanna KOH-HOE	Focus on the Family Ltd.
Andrew KONG	Personal capacity
Sam LAM	Linkage Asia Pte Ltd
Darius LEE	Current affairs blogger, writer and forum contributor
LEOW Yangfa	Oogachaga
Lynette LI	Personal capacity
LOO Zihan	Personal capacity
Edwin LOY	Faith Community Baptist Church
MOHD FARIZMI Chong Bin Alif Chong	Personal Capacity
MOHD IMRAN bin Mohamed Taib	Leftwrite Centre
MOHD Noor Deros	Wear White Movement
Ann NGIAW	Cornerstone Community Church

Pauline ONG	Free Community Church
Lai Kheng POUSSON	Special Assistant, LoveSingapore
Dr Tony SEE	National University of Singapore
Miak SIEW	Free Community Church Singapore
Jason SIM	We Are Against Pink Dot in Singapore Facebook Group
Mabel SIM	Personal capacity
Jolene TAN	Association of Women for Action and Research
Joseph TAN Peng Chin	Personal capacity
Sylvia TAN	Pink Dot SG
Jonathan TAY	Hope Church Singapore
John TEO	Free Community Church
Stanley TEO	Personal Capacity
THAM Yuen-C	Singapore Press Holdings Ltd
Prof. THIO Li-ann	National University of Singapore
TOO Teh Hsin	Personal capacity
UNG Tze Yang	Personal capacity
Rev Daniel WEE	Vicar, Church of Our Saviour
Dr Vivienne WEE	Association of Women for Action & Research
Jolovan WHAM	Personal capacity
Assoc Prof. Eleanor WONG	National University of Singapore
ZUBEE Ali	Association of Women for Action & Research

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